THE LORD OF THE RINGS

BEAM SOFTWARE'S FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING RECOUNT THEIR JOURNEY FROM HOBBITON TO MOUNT DOOM

CRACK CITY

SECRET AGENT GARRY CAPPUCCINNI BUSTS DRUG GANGS IN HIS FUTURISTIC SCI-FI THRILLER

THE RED KIPPER FLIES AT MIDNIGHT

TONY BARBER FOILS A SECRET NAZI PLOT FOR A FOURTH REICH IN VALKYRIE 17

TREVOR TOMS

FROM PHIPPS TO THE RAMJAM, TREVOR TOMS WRITES HIS ADVENTURING MEMOIR

THE CURSE OF RABENSTEIN

THE AUTHOR OF THE ACCLAIMED HIBERNATED ADVENTURE SERIES RETURNS WITH HIS LATEST GAME

THE CLASSIC ADVENTURER

I owned an Acorn Electron as a kid. It wasn't the greatest games machine in the playground, but it did have the best game of all-time, Braben and Bell's *Elite*, and one of the best adventure games of all time, Trevor Hall's *Twin Kingdom Valley*.

For a boy with a fertile imagination, and an obsession with the Fighting Fantasy books, *Twin Kingdom Valley* whisked me through the screen, and into a fantasy world of babbling brooks, Forests, Orcs, Trolls, Goblins, Dragons, Kings and treasure!

I played as many adventures as I could, but It wasn't until I owned a ZX Spectrum and Fergus McNeill's *The Big Sleaze* that I encountered the same immersion with another game. A friend and I spent many weekends hunched over the keyboard, notepad and pen, determined that Sam Spillade would find the missing Maltese Bullfinch.

I'm therefore delighted that both Fergus and Trevor feature in this celebration of classic adventure games, along with many other adventures and authors that transported legions of other kids to far flung corners of their own imagination.

Mark James Hardisty, 2020

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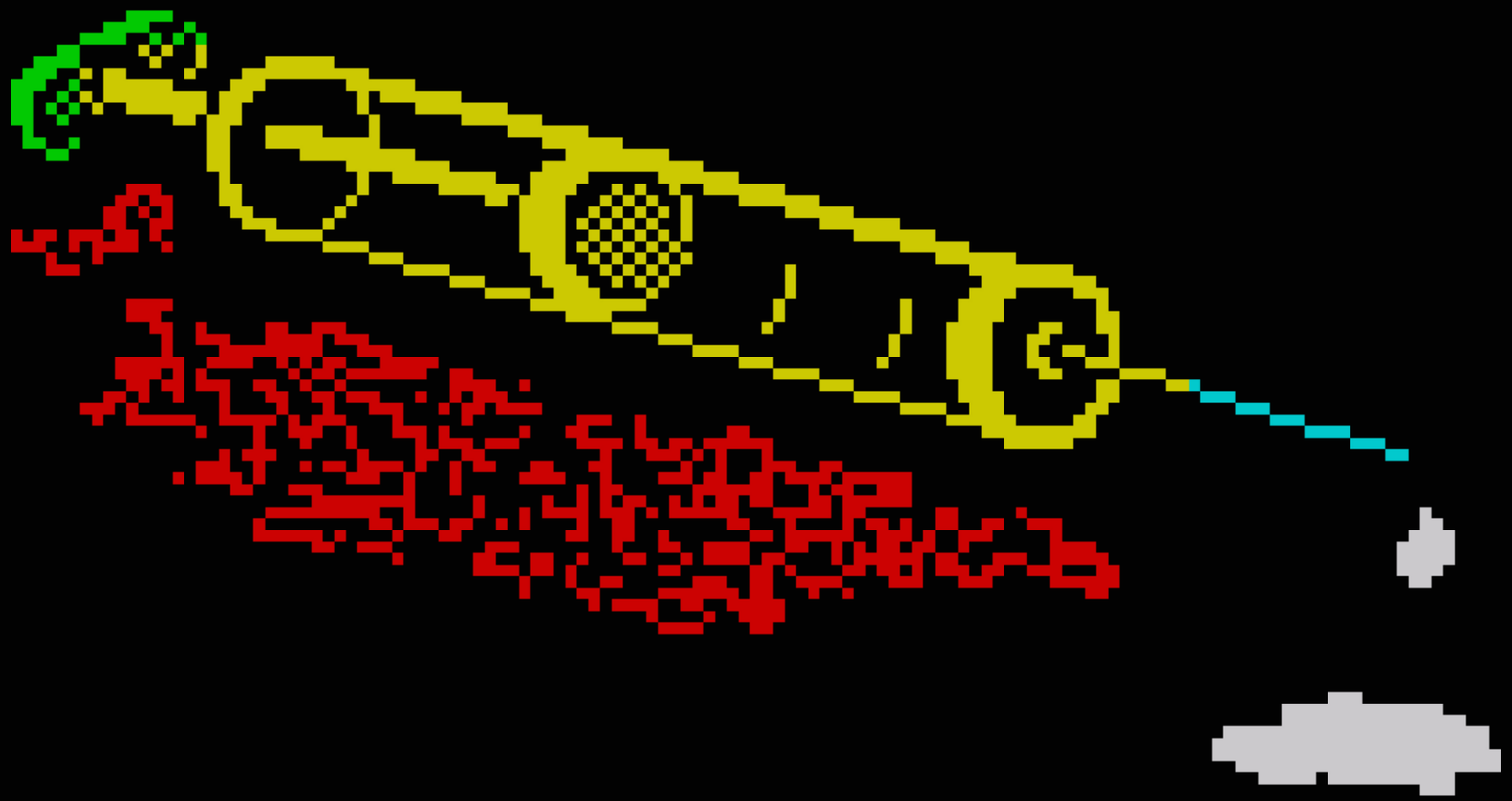
Format: ZX Spectrum
Publisher: Zenobi Software
Developer: Garry Cappuccini
Release Date: 1989



CRACK CITY

Crack City is one of the most innovative and technically accomplished adventures ever created using Gilsoft's *Professional Adventure Writer*. **Garry Cappuccini**'s futuristic spy thriller is a tightly woven 007-esque romp featuring a dazzling array of gadgets, diabolic henchmen and fiendish puzzles.

Garry Cappuccini was born in Sheffield in the early 70s, and led a nomadic life with his parents, moving between the Steel City, Birmingham and Preston before settling in Bishop's Stortford in 1984. For his 13th birthday in March 1985, his perceptive grandmother bought him his first computer; a brand-new Sinclair ZX Spectrum, and together with life-long friend Nick Heaps they started to discover the world of text adventuring.

[Garry] [...] My Italian 'Nonna' knew computers were the future. [...] I became friends with Nick [..] and together we got into Speccy gaming and both started writing adventure games. This was pretty much continuous until my family left Bishop's Stortford in 1988 for Sutton Coldfield. All these moves were due to my dad's job.

Like many wannabe adventure programmers and designers, Garry and Nick looked at the various adventure writing utilities that were available in the shops. They wanted a tool that provided the framework to do the heavy lifting so they could focus on programming the logic and creating the storyline and puzzles. Importantly, they needed a utility that could create graphics, and because of its illustrative capabilities, they opted for Sean Ellis's *Graphics Adventure Creator* [*GAC*] over Gilsoft's *The Quill*.

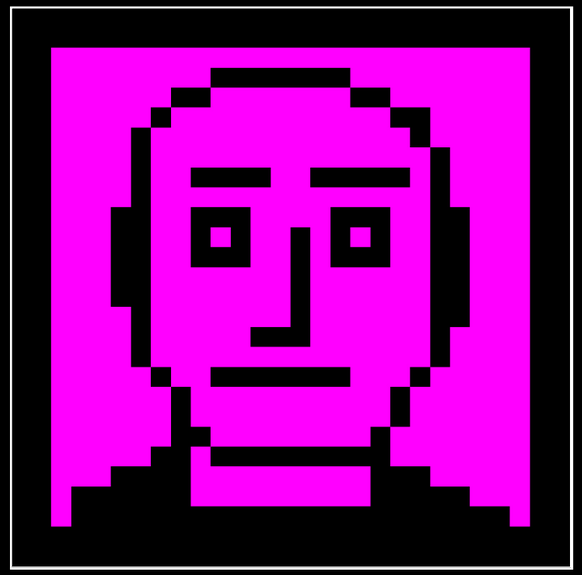
[Garry] I wrote a few games with [*GAC*], including 3 or 4 games in a pirate theme in what I called the *Bluddengutz* saga. I think *Bluddengutz* was an evil pirate. [*GAC*] made everything a lot more accessible – particularly for non-coders like me! It was very freeing, being able to concentrate on creativity and the execution of your ideas using a construct, a template given to you.

Nick and Garry spurred each other on ["A friendly, healthy rivalry. Thank you, Nick."], sharing ideas and solutions to design challenges, inspiring each other through their respective productivity. Through

the *Bluddengutz* saga they explored the capabilities of *GAC* and pushed the software to its limits through their creativity.

[Garry] I think Nick and I in hindsight had extracted as much as we could from *GAC*. *The Professional Adventure Writing System [PAWS]* was so well reviewed – and had a strong reputation following on from *The Quill* - that we both decided to buy it. I can't remember how much it was but there was no question of not having it! My family wasn't rich at all but I guess I would have saved up my paper round money to buy it. [I had the] same approach to affording a cheap, second-hand drum kit a few years later!

Garry set to work designing his next adventure, specifically shaping his design for the additional power granted to him by *PAWS*. He drew on the myriad of influences surrounding him in popular culture, and in 1987 the germ of an idea began to form. That idea would go onto become the spy-thriller *Crack City*.



[Garry] Bond [was an] influence, [...] with the gadgets, and also particularly [the movie] Live and Let Die. [...] I was a child of the Indiana Jones era so I wanted things to be more dynamic but also more modern than most text adventure games I'd come across, which tended to be historical fantasy, inspired by Tolkien. I also loved the Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone Fighting Fantasy books. Those guys didn't stop at what I'm calling historical fantasy. They covered present day and futuristic concepts, which I also loved. So, they were definitely an inspiration.

Using a notebook and a pencil, the adventure took shape through a rudimentary map, or plan with boxes showing the names of each location and which features, or objects would be held within them. Garry continued to evolve the layout, daydreaming, and letting his mind be creative to expand on the design, but always conscious of the memory limitations of the Spectrum

[Garry] [I wanted to] extract maximum playability, rather than using up precious memory space with verbose descriptions. For me, that was a sacrifice worth making. I figured there were plenty of other text-based adventure games where people could get their hit of atmospheric settings – the kind of Fighting Fantasy approach. I decided I could make up that in other ways, creating an atmosphere and excitement through graphics and more content - for example puzzles to solve, a more involved UI, other characters etc.

Garry set the game in the future, 2003, casting the player as a secret agent for a private investigations organisation called SIFF [the Secret Intelligence Foundation] in the fictional new metropolis of New Washington. The agent's task was to infiltrate a Mafioso drugs agency, active in the city, spewing their toxins from a drugs processing factory rumoured to exist in Cuba. It was your job to infiltrate the gang and bust the drugs ring.

Crack City was ambitious from the start and expanded into one of the most creative and idiosyncratic adventure games of the Spectrum era. Garry implemented an adventure user-interface that was visually stunning, involving and more compelling than anything seen before using Gilsoft's *PAWS*.

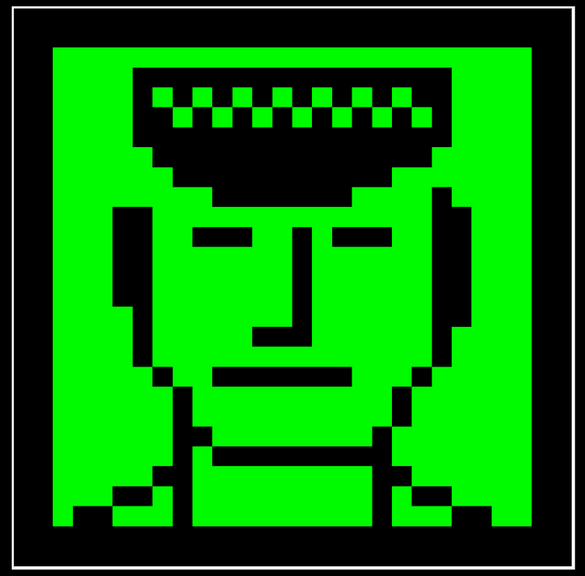
There was a graphical representation of non-playable characters moving in and around the scene, indicators showing the player's inventory and status such as their hunger, and a groundbreaking representation of the exits available for each location. All of this was customisable using a series of commands. The player could show and hide whichever elements suited their playing experience.

[Garry] One of the hardest aspects I remember was getting the non-playable characters to work and behave - and also the exits feature - I am indebted to Nick for getting a version of this to work, which I adapted! Thanks, Nick.

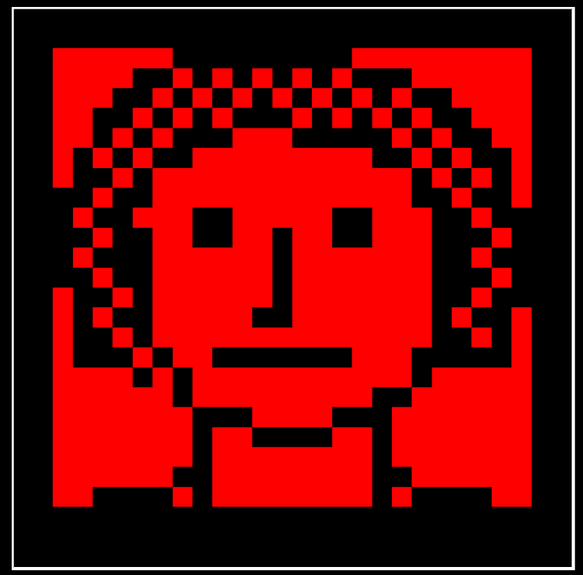
As with every other adventure targeting the Spectrum and 8-bit machines, the trick was to balance gameplay and code with the demands of providing enough prose and narrative to make the game more interesting and atmospheric. Using *PAWS*, Garry demonstrated that he was a highly competent programmer, fully mastering the tools available to him.

[Garry] Particularly towards the end of the coding, I was having to sacrifice more and more of the text descriptions of each location for the sake of playability and features. I knew it was worth it – as the latter I think made up for the lack of the former. I suppose drawing the graphics was the most obvious fun, but to be honest surmounting the constant challenges was kind of fun, in an occasionally frustrating way! I have to say I really enjoyed conceiving all the ideas as well. That's always a fun part – letting your mind have a good old daydream.

To take on the drug lords, the game offered a novel choice of playable protagonist, each offering an individual set of attributes based upon



SKILL and MORTALITY. There was the highly skilled American marksman Mick Hammelford, the Polish powerhouse Louis Chorbenski and the classic English spy from a tiny village in Hertfordshire, Ed Macperson.



[Garry] The choice of three playable characters was mostly for interest and variety, I think! It was best to choose a character with a higher mortality score, as I'm not even sure whether the skill rating had any bearing! I'll confess I may have overlooked incorporating that into the game. In terms of the non-playable characters, that was also to introduce something more dynamic to the usual text adventure template.

Unlike many games, the opening sequences to the adventure allowed the player to explore most of the game's relatively small number of locations. The result of the limited gamespace was an adventure with a tightly designed series of puzzles. The focus, as Garry mentioned earlier, was on testing the player's logical power, balancing the restrictions on text with the ambition of the UI and other features.

[Garry] I definitely wanted to extract maximum playability from the Speccy's limited memory. But I also wanted visual impact, as you say. [...] it was all about constantly reducing down the descriptive text for the sake of retaining playability and all the plot elements I'd incorporated. [...] So, I knew right from the start that I was going to limit the number of locations, but it wouldn't matter because there would be so much to engage the player. That was the aim, anyway!

Given the plot and storyline, the Bond influence is noticeable in every aspect of the game. There's a smattering of gadgets, recognisable villains, and a brilliant re-enactment of the revolving table scene from Roger Moore's visit to The Fillet of Soul in Live and Let Die. The only thing missing, was a de facto Bond girl.

[Garry] I guess if I was writing it today, his assistant would probably have been female and had a greater role to play. And there would be diversity in there too! But, then again, I probably wouldn't just be playing around with 48K of memory. That's insane, every time I think about it.

Development continued for well over a year, well into the early months of 1989. In June, the first version of the adventure, originally entitled *Snap!*, as part of Garry's imagined *Snap!, Crackle! And Pop!* trilogy was finished.

[Garry] The bulk of the coding was done in 1988, particularly during a long hot summer in Sheffield that year, staying at my nan's in between houses as my family moved from Bishop's Stortford to Sutton Coldfield.

Snap!, was an urban reference to drug use; specifically the emerging popularity of a new drug, Crystal Meth. The choice of title reflected Garry's increasing maturity and awareness of the world around him.

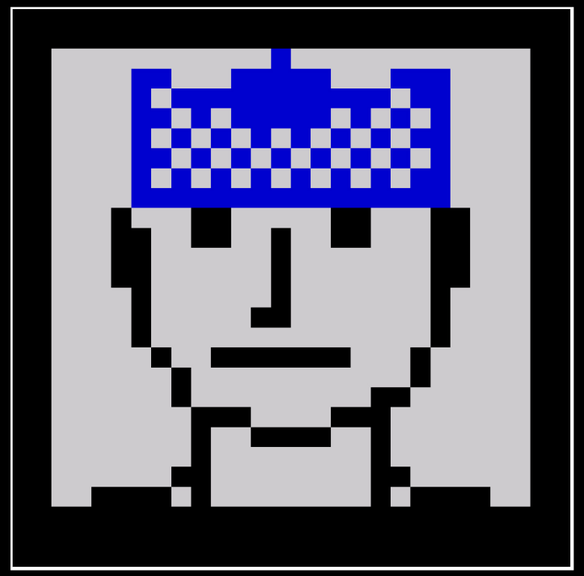
He may have been more streetwise, but Garry's naivety in the software world led him to pursue self-publishing the game. It was a mistake, since an established software house would certainly have jumped at the chance of releasing such a competent title. Ahead of offering the game via mail-order, a review copy was pushed to several magazines in July 1989. The Sorceress, the adventure columnist in Sinclair User magazine, only paid the game lip-service, but it was Mike Gerrard in Your Sinclair who changed the destiny of the game.

After sending the game back to Garry without a review, he said "I sent it back – not because it wasn't good enough, but because it was so darned good I suggested he tried to find a commercial publisher."

[Garry] I don't remember being disappointed. Or at least, if I was, it was quickly replaced by gratefulness and excitement based on the fact that, fundamentally, he really liked what I had done and was aiming for. [...] I'm just lucky that Mike Gerrard was such a great bloke, took time out to give me all that feedback, and supported me. [...] It gave me great confidence and I knew what I had to do. [...] I did some further bug fixes and renamed the game in 1989.

It's unclear whether Mike Gerrard understood the drugs reference in *Snap!, Crackle! and Pop!* but as part of his feedback he mentioned he disliked the title, and suggested that Garry rename it.

[Garry] *Crack City* was very quickly born [...] The name came to me almost straight away.



The newly monikered *Crack City*, now part of the *Snow Dogs* [another urban drugs reference] trilogy was posted to John Wilson's Zenobi Software in early 1990.

[Garry] I [sent it to Zenobi] because Mike G suggested John based on what they'd previously done, and their integrity. [...] Maybe I knew of Zenobi's reputation for adventure games at that time. I don't remember considering anyone else.

[John] I was first aware of the game when Mike Gerrard told me about it and that he had suggested to Garry that he should submit it to a few of the software houses for possible publication. He must have mentioned Zenobi to Garry because a few weeks later a tape dropped through my letterbox, along with a note asking if I would be willing to publish the game. [...] I initially I thought the game was too

complex ... so many little screens and info-boxes ... but I soon warmed to Garry's approach and then began to marvel at his innovative use of *PAWS*. After a few play throughs I realised I had something special in my tape-deck.

[Garry] [Thankfully] [John] was impressed. He really liked it. But, let's just say I had to make a few changes. [...] I received a big long bug list! So, it was about fixing a few glitches and holes. No fundamental changes were recommended or made.

[John] My playtesters gave it the thumbs-up and that was good enough for me. We did amend the thing but nothing drastic.

Gerrard eventually got to review the Zenobi published *Crack City* in the June 1990 issue of Your Sinclair. It was a resoundingly positive assessment, with Mike awarding the title a huge 9/10. He said "You'll not need much reason to keep playing *Crack City* – you'll play it because you want to. The game is quite simply brilliant and puts most home-grown adventures to shame".

[Garry] It was incredible. It's still one of the best days of my life. That rush of happiness and excitement... and pride. It's rare you get those moments, isn't it? And on the back of all that effort. It was magical. Thank you, Mike Gerrard. Thank you, John Wilson.

The canny Gerrard also pointed out his disappointment in the delay in the game coming to market, and the fixation on self-publishing, suggesting that an earlier release would have attracted some of the mainstream powerhouses such as Firebird or Mastertronic. If such a recognised brand had backed the game, the resultant sales could have been in the high thousands.

[Garry] Yes - I think I was a couple of years late, a couple of years after the Spectrum peak. I think sales and revenue would have been a lot higher in 1988 with one of the bigger companies. But, given it was 1990 I was pretty happy the sales it got. It was more about the recognition at that stage, definitely. [...] I received a few cheques [from Zenobi]. I got 30p a game. My mum remembers me receiving about £300 altogether. So that works out at about 1,000 copies.

[John] The game was probably up there amongst my top-sellers ... along with *Agathas's Folly* and my own stuff. Strange thing is, I lost touch with Garry ... changed his address etc and apart from the advanced-royalty cheque which I know he cashed, I don't think he ever received any more payments. I had a couple of cheques returned to me and after a while I stopped sending them. I probably owe him a couple of hundred pounds in back-royalties if I am honest.

Crack City stands the test of time as an exceptionally playable, brilliantly designed and highly polished adventure. The supreme use of *PAWS* in its technical presentation, the engine's vocabulary and parsing capabilities means it remains accessible to the modern player. To say that it was developed by a 15-year-old is just astounding. The only gameplay mechanism Garry introduced that could probably be criticised was the inclusion of puzzles and situations within the game that had a random chance of forcing different outcomes. This logic, the result of a RANDOM function, felt unfair, and when coupled with the occasional instant death it would something that a 21st century designer such as Stefan Vogt [**see *Curse of Rabenstein***] would avoid.

[Garry] Having played it again a couple of years ago, I did find a few of the situations rather 'ad-hoc' and random, and therefore kind of frustrating. I guess they would be where [I] was trying to engineer an outcome to progress my grand plot design, but with limited memory/capacity. In other words, I had to keep things simple in a few places in terms of plot/game construction and so one or two sacrifices were made. Frankly, it's also because at that age I probably was a bit optimistic about other people's ability to work out my inner rationale for a puzzle! However, I did include some HELP tips in the game, so I was obviously conscious of there being a small number of rather random, overly tricky puzzles to crack.

Towards the end of development, Garry had put some thought into the continuation of the planned trilogy of games. The next game was

[Above] Impeccibly written and perfectly programmed, Garry Cappuccini's spy thriller *Crack City* is a masterclass in adventure design.

called *A Handful of Snow* and was briefly mentioned but was never realised. The plot was never completed, and the scribbles of ideas and potential locations in a large exercise book was most likely lost in one of Garry's family's many house moves.

[Garry] I don't think John and I discussed the subsequent games in the planned trilogy. Anyway, I had already come up with the name *A Handful of Snow* towards the end of *Crack City's* development, hence its mention at the end of the game. [...] I started putting a few ideas together for *A Handful of Snow*, with the beginnings of a location map. But that's as far as I got.

We are poorer for the fact that Garry's vision of a trilogy didn't come to fruition. A few months after the Your Sinclair review he departed for university and was consumed with becoming a French and Economics student. He didn't continue with game development at all once he left *Crack City* behind. Still, he is exceptionally proud of his single published creation.

[Garry] [My] favourite [element] would be the graphics, colour, orientation (compass) and PSI characters. [The] least favourite would be the handful of more unintuitive problems/solutions I had to include as shortcuts either due to lack of memory, or designer error! Overall, though, despite frustrations about having to constantly cut back on scope/descriptive text, I'm proud of what I achieved given the severe memory limitations of the 48K Spectrum

After university, Garry joined an IT services company and then headed into an editorial and marketing role for a web company in 2000. In 2006 he left, muddled around in a few jobs before joining the BBC in 2008 managing web editorial, journeys and services for one of their websites. He's still putting his *Crack City* interface skills to use managing several of the BBC's user experiences.

[Garry] These days I get my creative fulfilment through song writing and (until a few years ago) playing live. I've played drums in a few bands over the years. But hey - you've got me excited about the prospect of adventure writing again, that's for sure! Thank you. I'll check it out. Wouldn't that be something?

DESERT ISLAND DUNGEONS

Secret Agent **Gary Cappuccini** escapes Crack City only for his plane to crash en route to the Maldives. Marooned on a deserted island, he has just five text adventures to help retain his sanity.

When I went to Uni, I left gaming behind completely. So, I'll stick with the Spectrum! From what I can remember:

The Hobbit – A real trailblazer for the text adventure scene.

The Boggit – Lovely font! And very funny.

Bored of the Rings – ditto.

Dracula – great atmosphere.

The Price of Magik – I liked that they were always trying to support the text and story with as many interesting visuals as they could.

Author: David Elkan
Publisher: Melbourne House
RRP: £3.95 (1984)
Buy it from: eBay/AbeBooks
Expect to pay: £3 - £6

A GUIDE TO PLAYING THE HOBBIT

Veronika Megler and Philip Mitchell's *The Hobbit* continued to baffle and befuddle adventurers long after its release. In 1984, David Elkan's guide was one of the first books to offer dedicated help in solving Melbourne House's Tolkien blockbuster.

David Elkan's playing guide was published in 1984, almost two years after *The Hobbit* was released to the public. The need for a dedicated book so long after the release of the game demonstrated the longevity and toughness of Veronika Megler and Philip Mitchell's classic adventure.

Cries for help with *The Hobbit* would frequent the adventure columns and letters pages of every magazine on every platform. Elkan's 76-page guide came to the rescue, splitting its advice into three handy sections.

After a foreword written by "authors of *The Hobbit*", the first 12 page section dealt with a general introduction to the game, covering basic adventuring concepts - moving around and getting to grips with the Inglish parser and vocabulary. It also covered dealing with other more advanced mechanics such as doors and passageways, weights and measures, and an introduction to the game's main characters; Thorin and Gandalf. The second section, The Hobbit Help pages, expanded on the overview of the first section, going into greater detail of what need to be done in wider locations found in the game; from The Misty Mountains to Long Lake. Advice was offered in a more cryptic way, making the reader work for the solution. The final section pulled back the curtain on specific puzzles, and offered a hand-holding walkthrough and commands for each location.

Screenshots from the ZX Spectrum version of the game adorned many pages, and the book is laid out in an easy-to-follow format. The three sections made it suitable for every skill level, and you could drop into each depending on the level of help you needed. As an accompaniment to getting enjoyment from this classic game, it's unparalleled.

TREVOR TOMS

Trevor Toms designed an adventure writing framework that went onto inspire many other adventure architects; including *The Graphic Adventure Creator's* Sean Ellis and *Valkyrie 17* author Tony Barber. He played a key role in developing games for Phipps Associates and with entertainment pioneer George Stone founded the revered RamJam Corporation.

This is his memoir.

I joined a company called Hoskyns in 1970, initially as a computer operator (spare time job!) but got hooked onto programming and joined their team of programmers in 1971. As I always enjoyed the aspect of efficiency, I moved into a unique role of maintaining the Hoskyns' in-house version of the *George2* operating system. This in turn led me to meet two other long-term colleagues (now firm friends), John Phipps and Jon Bareford who were developing a new Intel 8080-based system for hotels.

Together, and along with a fourth member of the team, we wrote a multi-user operating system (four users) for hotel room and billing management. My role was the development of the main OS kernel and the billing process.

Phipps Associates

In 1979 John Phipps left Hoskyns and asked me to join him in a new partnership – Phipps Associates – which was then intended to provide utility software for the young microcomputer industry. We were planning to release screen management, sorting and *ISAM*

software to enable easier application system building for *CP/M*. In this period, I came across the original release of *Colossal Caves* and was again hooked. This, to me at that time, was a genius piece of work.

I bought a ZX80 as soon as they were released, simply for fun, and – with no intention other than personal pleasure - began to create a few very simple games for it. John and I had the idea of putting these into a book to give out as Christmas presents to our key customers. I padded out the book with some examples of use of each BASIC keyword, and we printed 100 copies of "The ZX80 Pocket Book". They were all hand-collated and bound in John's house, then sent out to friends and contacts.

We suddenly received an order for 300.

That was a life-changing moment. From system control software we suddenly became a book publisher. I was contacted by Sinclair and asked to create a Learning Lab for what was to become their new ZX81, and the result of that experience persuaded John and I to produce a new "ZX81 Pocket Book". I'd read an article about designing adventure games and thought that an adventure-writing kit would be a good feature in this book. And so the stage was now complete.

The *Adventure Authoring Kit* in the ZX81 Pocket Book included a mini-adventure called *The City of Alzan* which acted as a demonstration of the key elements – moving between locations, control of objects and conditional state testing.

We started getting people sending in their own mini-adventures, and also requests for our book games to be available on cassette, so gradually the publishing shifted into game production. Two extremely good contributors of adventure games were Mike Farley (*The Knight's Quest*, *Greedy Gulch*) and Tony Barber (*Valkyrie 17*). Tony was also a dab hand at arcade-style games, but as these were written in BASIC so did not perform well enough for publication. So I set about writing a BASIC compiler [a tool to convert BASIC commands into fast machine code] for them which allowed all Tony's arcade games to run smoothly and effectively and they were sold on cassette.

The launch of the Sinclair Spectrum allowed some of Tony's and Mike's games to be re-engineered for the additional memory and colour, and that's when Phipps Associates finally took off.

Mike Farley sent in some very good adventure games using a split-screen design with a picture at the top, and text below. Navigating between locations was extremely slow, so I embarked on a runtime engine that would draw the pictures using machine code. This made the games run much more quickly and they became viable for sale.

Mike sent in three adventures in quick succession, of which *The Knight's Quest* was the most ambitious and became our biggest seller.

Around 1984, Jon Bareford introduced me to George Stone, who at that time, was a creative copy writer for TV ads. He too was a firm adventure fan, and in particular of the Zork games. He was also the prime creator of the Max Headroom character for TV. We immediately hit it off, and, for a series of reasons, I decided to leave John and join with George in setting up The RamJam Corporation.

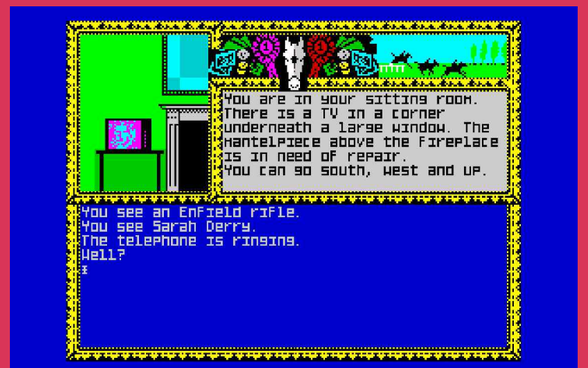
The RamJam Corporation

Mike and Tony had both submitted new adventures at this point, so we decided to work on these for RamJam. George used his contacts to set up a partnership with Palace Software, whose main produce at that time was *The Evil Dead* [a survival horror adventure game released in 1984], written by Richard Leinfellner.

Tony's new game had a Second World War escape theme, which George decided to re-work into a more post-war shadowy theme with much of the text rewritten. However, now it wouldn't fit into memory – as a copy writer, his text was rich and perfect, but extremely verbose in comparison to Tony's original. George dug his

[Above] Mike Farley used Trevor Tom's adventure system to create *Knight's Quest* for the ZX-81. The updated, ZX Spectrum version is an enjoyable romp through Camelot chasing the lost treasures of Merlin and rescuing the obligatory Princess from a Witche's Tower.

[Above] RamJam's adventuring knowledge culminated in the excellent *Terrors of Trantoss* - another game penned by Mike Farley. The ingenus split-screen window showcases *The Biro's* bitmap graphics system and the ability to play as two protagonists.



[Above] Based on Dick Francis' thriller, in *Twice Shy* you play the part of Johnathan Derry who is plunged into the seedy underworld of horse racing gambling. It was RamJam's last adventure outing published by Vicky Carne's Mosaic Publishing [**see Issue 03**].

heels in – he didn't want to lose a word.

So I set about writing an encoding engine which used a combination of library tokens and Huffman encoding to reduce the size of the text by over 50%. That then allowed greater freedom for text and also allowed the games to direct text to particular windows on the screen.

The game became *Valkyrie 17*, and George persuaded Palace to package it in an extremely (for the time) lavish box, with a badge and leaflets which gave some atmosphere to the game. It was received well by the press, and although we never saw sales figures from Palace, we believe it sold well.

George asked an old friend of his – Simon Dunstan – to join as our primary artist. Mike Farley had sent me his latest creation – *The Terrors Of Trantoss* – which used an ambitious strategy of allowing the player to control one of two key characters in the game. This allowed for some quite complex game play in solving some of the puzzles embedded in the storyline. Simon set to work designing some location graphics based on a 256-grid of images which could be combined to create different pictures with only a very small memory usage. My adventure engine grew to accommodate this, and *The Terrors Of Trantoss* emerged as a visually impressive, complex adventure game which I still admire greatly.

By now, Ramjam was working with Ariolasoft instead of Palace, and we began a series of C64 game conversions using my BASIC compiler to manage the process quickly. Some of these conversions were better than others – I'll leave it at that!

Tony Barber joined Ramjam, and George, Simon and Tony began work on *Panzadrome*, our first arcade-style game. I merged in the grid graphics code from the adventure engine into the BASIC compiler, and introduced sprite management routines using REM statements to provide the control mechanism. This made it easier for Tony to create the game logic yet gave the performance we needed for arcade games.

George made contact with the publishers of Dick Francis books, and we were commissioned to create an adventure based on his Twice Shy novel, a story set in the world of horse racing. The person who had been nominated to create the game (an adventure containing a mini-arcade game partway through the plot) pulled out at the last moment, with practically none of the adventure game written other than the synopsis. With many late nights, I completed the adventure, while Tony managed to get the arcade portion written, and the game was released on time. I do not have good memories of this, although the game itself was received reasonably well. Part of the deal included versions for the C64 and Amstrad, so my adventure engine and BASIC compiler now needed to be re-written to allow the game code to be cross-compiled onto these systems. This was much more the aspect of development that I enjoyed, and allowed all of our games to target the newer games computers. Having said that, I don't think any others were ever released on the C64, and only a handful on the Amstrad.

We were approached by two adventure fans – Chris Elliot and Dick Edwards – who wanted to create an adventure based on the Call Of Cthulhu mythology. This meant that our *Adventure Authoring Kit* would need to be knocked into a form that could be used by anyone, not just people who were able to write Sinclair BASIC. This became known affectionately as *The Biro*, and I wrote in a language called Mumps running on an Amstrad PCW system. It allowed non-technical writers to create locations, characters, objects and their interaction, saved in a database, and to generate the output files which could be loaded into the adventure engine on the Spectrum. *The Biro* also included a rudimentary "test" process so that the writers could see how the logic of the game worked without having to export it all into a Spectrum for testing. Unfortunately, the *The Biro's* test function was simply too slow for any real use, and Chris & Dick would bring their work into our office for loading and testing.

Their game was finally released as *The Hound Of Shadow*.

Format: C64, Plus/4, CPC, ZX Spectrum (+3, ESXDOS, Next), Amiga, Atari ST, DOS and Adventuron
Publisher: Poly.Play
Developer: Stefan Vogt/Puddle Software
RRP: €28.27 + shipping
Release Date: March 2020
Buy: https://www.polyplay.xyz
Download: https://8bitgames.itch.io/rabenstein
Contact: http://8-bit.info/contact/

THE CURSE OF RABENSTEIN

Supernatural forces and dastardly deeds in *The Curse of Rabenstein*, a brand new ghostly graphic adventure from award-winning adventure author **Stefan Vogt.**

Having almost single-handedly revived the modern 8-bit text adventure scene, Stefan Vogt's adventure writing career juggernaut shows no sign of slowing. After the release of his science-fiction based thriller *Hibernated: This Place Is Death,* Stefan is back with a brand new graphic text adventure that aims to make the genre more accessible to new and seasoned players alike. *The Curse of Rabenstein* is the first release from his new software house, the Puddle Soft collective, staffed by former members of the much admired hobbyist retro development team Pond Software.

The Curse of Rabenstein is set in 1862. Its protagonist is a student of medicine, returning from Zurich after a meeting with Doctor Atten - someone that the player hopes will further their own understanding of science. During the exhausting trip home, heading across the Rhine and towards Strasbourg, the carriage our hero is riding in suddenly stops in the middle of the Black Forest. While the

[Opposite] [Top] The village inn, a welcome refuge in the Amiga version of *Curse of Rabenstein*. **[Opposite] [Bottom]** Stylish graphics and a neat 42-column text display in the ZX Spectrum port.

coachman, obviously lost, checks his maps and attempts to get his bearings, the main character takes a stroll through the trees and encounters two ghostly apparitions of Roman llegionnaires. Gripped by terror, the protagonist rushes back to the carriage and eventually stumbles into the nearby village of Rabenstein. There's a cosy wellcome at the inn, but after conversing with the locals the hamlet's spooky mystery begins to unravel.

Rabenstein was released back in March whilst Stefan was in the midst of a whole range of other projects, including the continuation of his magnum opus, *Hibernated 2*, the sequel to the Crash-Smash award-winning adventure.

[Stefan] I actually needed a break from *Hibernated*. The game became such a massive viral success that I put myself a lot under pressure to create the sequel [...] I started working on *Hibernated 2* and I did not really "feel" it. That was when I realised that I just needed a change to clear my head. The initial *Rabenstein* was an entry in the *Adventuron* Halloween Jam last year.

The shorter development time is reflected in the game's compact design. It features just twenty or so locations. Several online reviews of the game have criticised this brevity but in doing so are missing the fact that there's still plenty of punch packed into Rabenstein's diminutive stature. It's an adventure that showcases Stefan's maturing skills; a pocket-sized, well-crafted vehiclle for his creative and technical talents, putting his modern adventure writing philosophy front-and-centre. Rabenstein has clearly and cleverly pitched the puzzle difficulty at its target audience - which, by the way, is not seasoned, toughened adventurers.

The game's parser accepts simple verb-noun inputs, but the generous vocabulary gives the player plenty of options. Communication between characters is important in the game and Rabenstein employs an uncomplicated TALK command, disposing of the more complex SAY TO found in other games. These player aids and the entry-level puzzle chains are all designed to remove some of the usual gameplay barriers that frustrate inexperienced players. It's possible to move the story on and explore most of the map without much difficulty. Stefan has shaped a narrative and difficulty that perfectly targets his audience, whilst keeping more advanced players captivated with the game's technical wizardry and atmospheric and descriptive writing.

[Stefan] *Rabenstein* was intentionally designed [to be] a short novella that opens up the genre for people new to it. That's the idea behind it. *Rabenstein* also has a strong focus on experiencing story that reminds you of famous b-movie horror plots, and the game has a very linear progress. I wanted the player being able to consume and solve it in 1.5 - 2 hours as I thought that's just the right amount of time for your first adventure experience.

The *DAAD Adventure Writer* has been put to good use, together with Uto's *DRC compiler* and Maluva enhancements, with many of the most popular retro micros catered for. As well as the usual 8-bit platforms, graphically enhanced 16-bit versions for the Amiga and Atari ST are also availalble (and argueably provide the best experience). Chris Ainsley's *Adventuron* (which gets better in every iteration) provides the engine for a modern browser-based version. There's also a delicious Spectrum Next port that makes use of the machine's extended capabilities and thus presents location graphics on-par with the 16-bit versions. The story, puzzles and outcomes by the way, are all the same regardless of platform, it's the lush graphics that are different depending on the target machine's capabilities.

The wonderful graphics, which are very reminiscent of the illustrations in Fergus McNeil's *Mindfighter*, are an essential part of the experience; perfectly capturing and enhancing the eerie storyline. The inclusion of the rich, memory-hungry images is one of the reasons that the game has to run from disk. The original graphics were created by pixel artist Dylan Barry but Stefan ended up tweaking or even redrawing them to tailor them to each target system.

PHILANTHROPIC PUDDLESOFT

Stefan has used *The Curse of Rabenstein* as a development resource for evolving the capabilities of the *DAAD* system alongside the enhancements and utilities createed by Carlos "Uto" Sanchez, a veteran of the Spanish text adventure scene.

His ability to cross-compile a single source repository onto a myriad of platforms caught the attention of the adventure community, many of whom were attempting to write their own games and were interested in the process.

In a philanthropic move, Stefan agreed to make the source available to the community to study the programming techniques, and make derivative games using the bundled compilers.

The source and associated code can be downloaded from:

https://github.com/ByteProject/Rabenstein

[Stefan] I think it took me about 10-12 weeks to draw the graphics. It was a pretty arduous work which I clearly underestimated. It definitely was the most challenging task in creating *Rabenstein*. I did not just want to port the graphics over with little effort, so they were redrawn for every platform, making use of the platforms unique graphic features, including an extended palette on the CPC for example, or stunning hi-res images with 16 colours on the Commodore Plus/4 port. Every port of *Rabenstein* became something special and I think that is what makes it unique. You just pick up your favourite home computer and feel that the *Rabenstein* version was created with all the love and all the capabilities it could achieve on that platform.

Puddle have partnered with specialist publisher Poly.Play to create a physical release to buy, and as usual, they have knocked the packaging out of the park - bundling an exquisite oversized cardboard box containing a selection of digital versions of the game on SDCard, along with physical "feelies" of a necklace with a wooden cross, a manual, stickers and posters.

Curse may be too easy or short for hardened adventurers, but us mere adventuring mortals will appreciate the work put into making the game accessible. Novices and casuals players will enjoy the hand-holding and linear puzzles, but everyone however, should buy *Rabenstein* for its clever narrative and huge effort Stefan has put into the game's high production values and presentation.

[Stefan] Experienced adventure players might still enjoy *Rabenstein* for the art and the story, but on the other hand they could be a bit disappointed because the game is very easy and it's much shorter than a usual adventure game. [Then again] I saw lots of messages and reviews from people for whom *Rabenstein* was their first adventure experience, and they praised it for being so accessible.

It's the perfect game to entice more players into adventure games and is a technical tour-de-force demonstrating Stefan's masterful writing flair and technical expertise. We'll no doubt see, a more gritty, and tougher adventure when *Hibernated 2* is released later in 2020.

GAMES BRITANNIA

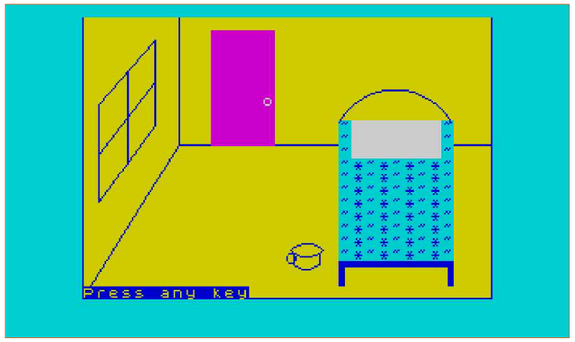
The 1980s were a hugely creative time for text adventures and the British videogame industry in general. No topic was seemingly out of bounds, with games that explored many of the distinctive attributes of British culture; aspects such as the monarchy, pop music, holidays, literature, transport, the class system, and the politics of Thatcherism. **The Classic Adventurer** curates a unique collection of games that could only have been crafted by British authors...

TERRORMOLINOS

Melbourne House, 1985

We have featured several of Trevor Lever and Peter Jones' games in this piece as no other adventure writer (or in this case duo) perfectly captured the zeitgeist of the many aspects of British life and culture in the 80s. *Terrormolinos*, the pair's supremely funny second game pokes fun at the growing trend in the 80s for the unwashed masses to bundle themselves off abroad on cheap "package" holiday to sun-soaked balearic beaches.

You are Dad, taking wife Beryl and kids Doreen and Ken to the Costa Brava resort of Terrormolinos, surviving various perils along the way like being buried up to the neck in sand. You complete the game by taking home a series of saucy-seaside "Saucivision" holiday snaps that cleverly used *The Illustrator* capabilities of *The Quill*.



MAD MARTHA

Mikro-Gen, 1983

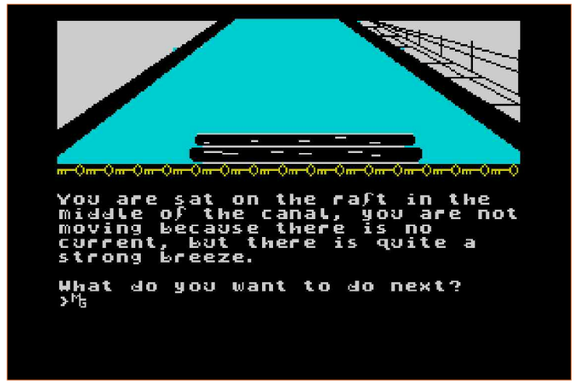
You are Henry Littlefellow, hen-pecked husband of battle-axe Martha. Your quest is to steel your wages from Martha's purse and make a run for it to reach the adult entertainment emporium. A very early BASIC hybrid arcade/adventure from Mikro-Gen who released several text adventures, including a *Martha* sequel later that year.

HRH

8th Day Software, 1986

Poking fun at the monarchy is a Great British pastime, and in Michael White's *HRH* no member of the House of Windsor (and a cast of other well known figures) was safe from his satirical quill and political punches.

Whether it's impersonating a royal by wearing fake oversized ears, dealing with the results of illicit extramarital affairs, or fending off rampaging corgis, White's observations are as relevant and sharp now as they were back in 1986 when the game was released.

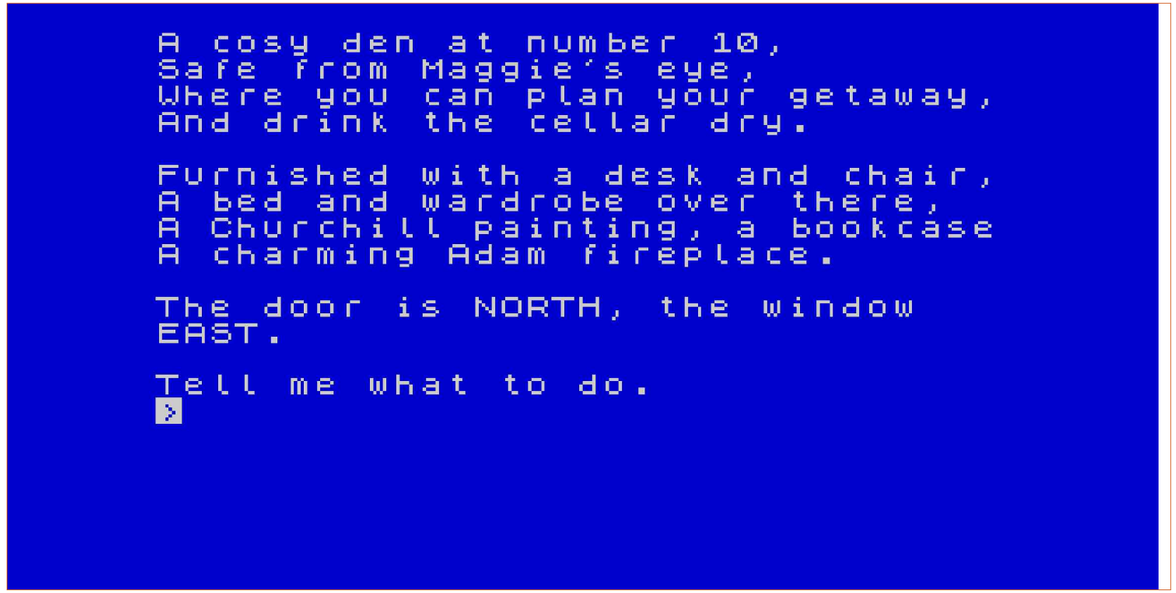


SHREWSBURY KEY

Players, 1986

Players Software were an overlooked budget label that supported the text adventure genre with several titles of decent quality, including the experimental title *The experience*. Despite the name, *Shrewsbury Key* (penned by Mark Gipson) is predominately set in the northern cathedral city of York, in the mid-80s.

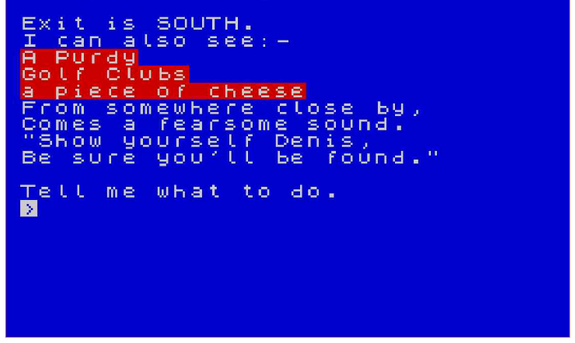
Our protagonist starts on a chilly platform at York railway station, and in what could be a nod to Gipson's love of the British transport system, has to navigate a journey south, through various towns and cities (including the delights of Stockport) to locate the fabulous golden key of Shrewsbury. Why a golden key? I've no idea. There's not much background to the fanciful plot and it's even more at odds with the insightful social commentary of the prose. Regardless of the gameplay and logic issues, and some distinctly average graphics, *Key* is a decent slice of British adventuring.

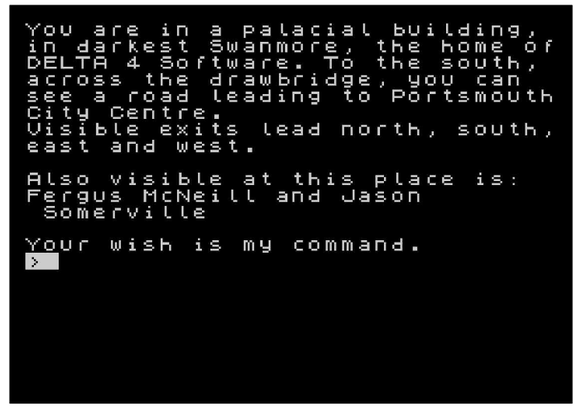


DENIS THROUGH THE DRINKING GLASS

Applications Software Specialists, 1983

In this satirical adventure you take on the title role of Denis Thatcher, the hen-pecked husband of the "Iron Lady", Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Your goal is to escape her clutches and end up in the pub (where else?). Featuring a cast drawn from the corridors of power of 80s Britain, *Denis* is a lovingly crafted and humorous *Quilled* adventure. The follow-up, the beautifully titled *The Tebbit* was finished but never shipped. Its release was considered too insensitive given the events of the 1984 bombing of the Tory Party conference in Brighton, in which Norman Tebbit and his wife were injured.

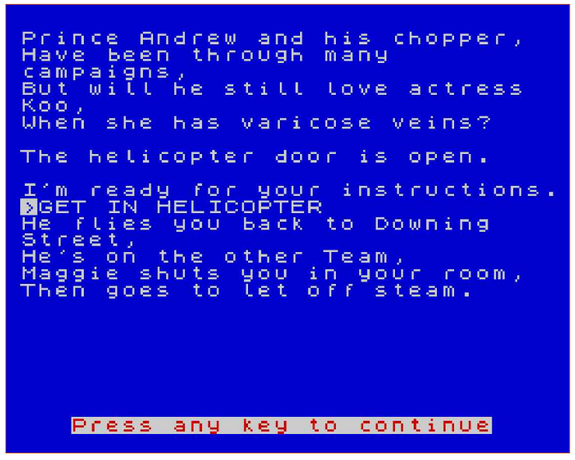




QUEST FOR THE HOLY JOYSTICK

Delta 4 Software, 1984

Fergus McNeil's *Quest for the Holy Joystick,* and its sequel *The Return*, perfectly capture a moment in time in the thriving British adventure scene. In the game Fergus explores his relationships with the many adventure afficinardos, parodying software houses and events like microfairs, making fun of each of the characters and situations with his typical razor sharp humour and in-jokes.



POLEARN

Sheol Software, 1989

Written using the *PAWS*, and utilising the full capacity of the ZX Spectrum 128K, *Polearn* was the solitary release from Dudley-based Sheol Software.

It's an exquisitely crafted and beautifully written Cornish tale of mystery and the supernatural, sparsely populated with some good looking graphics. Reputedly taking well over a year to develop, its depth, size and attention to detail makes it as good, if not better than Rod Pike's many mainstream horror titles.

Sheol sunk without a trace and never made another game, but this pearl is well worth tracking down.

BEATLE QUEST

Top Ten Software, 1985

In a time before insanely expensive licencing deals and trademark infringement, Garry Marsh produced this "official" Beatles adventure using *The Quill* and an eccentric splash of surrealism and creativity.

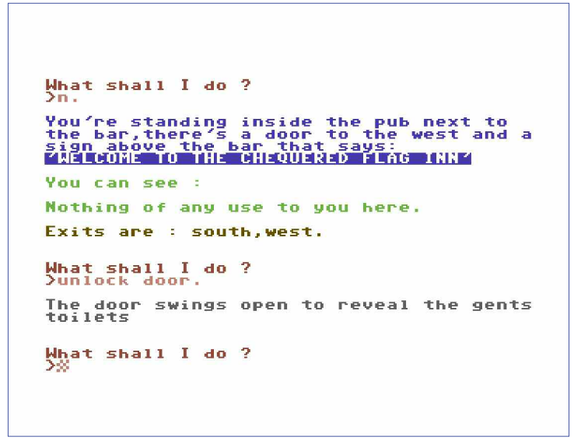
Having first thought about writing a game based on the double LP magnum opus White Album, Marsh crafted out a game that interwove the lyrics of Beatles songs into a series of neatly drawn illustrations, locations and puzzle chains. *Quest* evolved into a oneiric waltz of eggmen, walruses, tangerine trees, plasticine porters and looking glass ties.

With a paltry 500 copies produced (by Garry himself under his own label) and featuring exquisite artwork by Alan Alridge, it is now a cult collectors piece. Garry revealed, in a 2017 interview with John Aycock, that snippets of his proposed trilogy of Beatles games still exist, so there's hope one day that the magical mystery tour will continue - lawyers permitting.

CLASSROOM CHAOS

Central Solutions, 1985

If you can imagine what Microsphere's *Skool Daze* would be like converted into a text adventure then you end up with Central Solutions' *Classroom Chaos*. It's a budget *Quilled* adventure featuring a cast of eccentric schoolteachers, George the Janitor and the school swot Noall. To evade an eternity in detention you have to explore the school to find the missing Challenge Cup before the Headmaster finds and blames you for its loss.

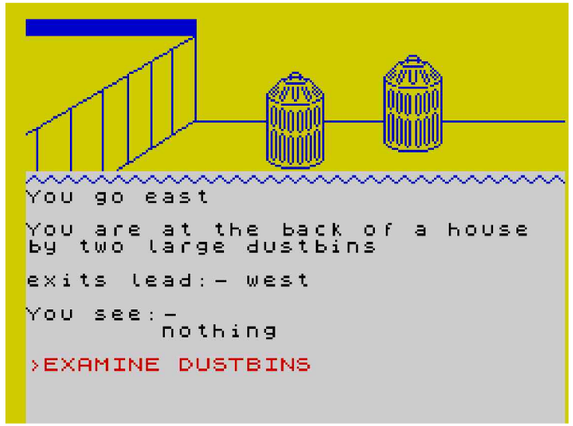


PUB QUEST

Dream Software, 1987

Chris Shrigley wrote *Pub Quest* in 1983 while at college. Whether it's written from personal experience remains a mystery, but you play as the protagonist who has just run up a huge bar bill at their local boozer.

You're completely inebriated and without a penny to your name. You stumble off to find money to pay your landlord. The cash is, the instructions claim, missing in the local sewer system. Perhaps your wallet fell out of your pocket and into the drain in your mad rush to get to the pub? Anyway, it's a good little slice of beer-centric British life and Chris has even made the BASIC source code available freely via his website.



URBAN UPSTART

Richard Shepherd Software, 1983

Pete Cooke's *Urban Upstart*, is an adventure that painted a bleak picture of life in Thatcher's Britain, set in the fictional post-industrial town of Scarthorpe. To seek a better life, the main character must explore the town, trudging along its many depressingly named streets, past lager-swigging football fans, and escape on a flight out of the local airport.

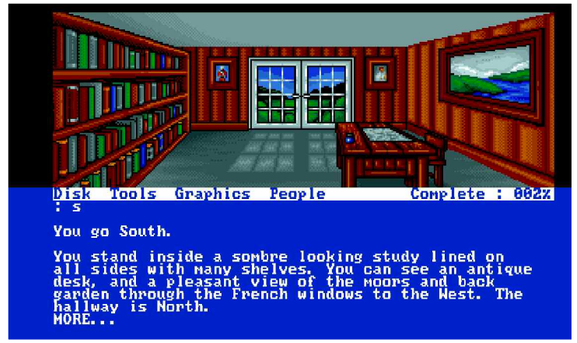
Despite being basic, and pretty barren, I'm sure the experiences of Scarthrope would evoke memories for many teenage players in Northern towns in the 80s.

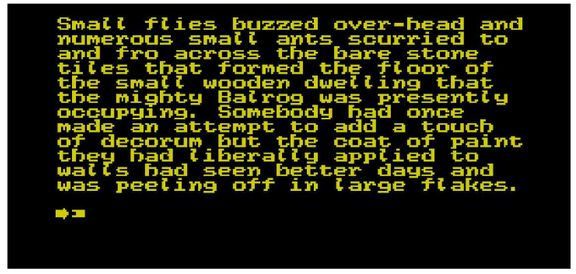
THE FAMOUS FIVE: FIVE ON A TREASURE ISLAND

Enigma Variations, 1991

Since the publication of Enid Blyton's Five on a Treasure Island in 1942, countless children have grown up with the exciting escapades of Julian, Dick, Anne, their tomboy cousin George and a dog called Timmy. Enigma Variations brought to life the first ever computer game based upon Blyton's work; evoking memories of long, scorching school summer holidays filled with maps, torches, sandwich packed lunches, exploration and adventure.

Coming late in the golden years of adventuring, Colin Jordan used his clever *WorldScape* system to deliver a terrific game, with multi-character support where you could play any of the Famous Five. Both 8-bit and 16-bit versions had excellent graphics and a game crammed with a plotline faithfully capturing the spirit of the books.

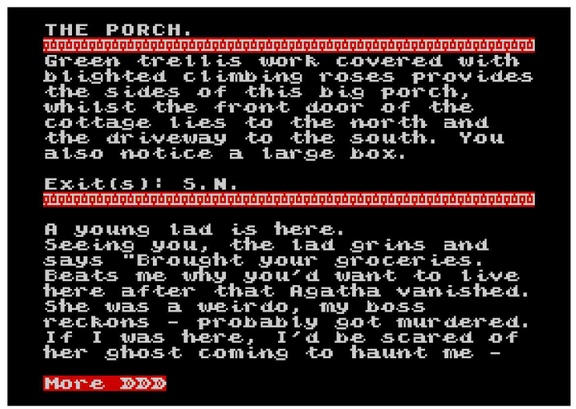




BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Zenobi Software, 1988

The British have always embraced a particular comedic culture where bodily functions are involved. In *Behind Closed Doors*, the cult tale from maestro John Wilson, we have a terrific single room adventure set in the smallest room in the house. The game finds the Balrog, trapped in the privy after a particularly hot cat vindaloo. With a"burning sensation in his nether-regions" the latch is locked from the outside by two mischievous young Boggits and The Balrog has to avoid a bottom disaster and make quick his escape.



AGATHA'S FOLLY

Zenobi Software, 1989

The joyful writing of Linda Wright evokes memories of early 20th century novelists Enid Blyton and Virginia Woolf all wrapped up in a devilishly complicated Agatha Christie thriller. Her *Agatha's Folly* may not be as technically complex as *The Beast* or as challenging as *Cloud 99*, but it oozes Linda's usual exquisite attention-to-detail and impeccable *Professional Adventure Writer* polish.

DODGY GEEZERS

Melbourne House, 1986

London's underworld in the sixties housed a swathe of notorious gangsters and organised crime groups that were somehow venerated into celebrity and cultural myth as the public admired the glamour and willingly ignored the violence.

A life of crime and gangsters made for good text adventure fodder, and games such as the imaginatively titled *Mafia Contract* and *Hit* [**see Issue 08**] explored the genre from an American perspective. Trever Lever and Peter Jones however, both London boys, pitched their *Dodgy Geezers* classic firmly in the East End of the Big Smoke.

In *Geezers*, you're a low-level hoodlum just released from prison after serving a three year stretch for your part in the Long Ditton Spaghetti Caper. Pulling together the rest of your band of merry men, there's one last blag in the offing that should net enough dough to disappear overseas to a life of exile in the Costa Brava holiday resort of Terrormolinos.

Lever and Jones introduced a cast of unsavoury characters; Bullet-Proof George, Little Ken, Mr High-Score, Old Cracker, Tweedle, Tricks and Soaps - each with their own particular villanous skill. It's from this cast of diamond geezers that in part one of the adventure you must assemble your gang, whilst evading the long arm of the law. In part two you have to break into a bank vault and the escape with the loot.

Chock-o-block full of brilliantly written London-slang and sound-a-like locations and a machine gunning of humour, *Geezers* is one of the best British adventures ever written. With a custom adventure engine, and the bonus of a fantastic theme song penned and sung by the authors on the flip side of the game cassette, it can't be recommended enough.

CLIVE GIFFORD

The British home computing boom was fuelled by a legion of hobbyist programmers building and experimenting with the new technology. The early flames of the game industry were stoked by countless coding books, brilliantly written by a variety of British writers. One of the most prolific and influential authors was **Clive Gifford**.

Clive Gifford's first exposure to computing came courtesy of his father, who showed his son the workstations that were in use at his place of work at Heathrow Airport. Though he didn't fully understand their emerging impact, Clive's dad enrolled them both at a local computer user group where they learned to program in FORTRAN and BASIC on a loaned Sharp MZ-80K.

[Clive] I remember our first attempts at creating a game being a quiz constructed out of little more than If/Then statements. Dreadful. I remember getting my hands on a TRS-80, a PET, and ZX80s before my family forked out for a ZX81 – the singular most amazing, and frustrating, device I think I have ever owned. The 16K RAM Pack, gaffer taped on the back, and the thermal printer came later.

Games didn't really grab Clive's imagination at the time. He favoured investigating what was going on behind the scenes in the hardware and in the code of commercial programs. Dave Horne's *1K Chess* [published by Sinclair Research in 1982] for the ZX81 astonished him, showing that elegance in program design was a real and valuable attribute given the limitations of speed and working memory of such a rudimentary 8-bit computer.

[Clive] I do remember Olsen's *Death Ship* [published in 1980 by Aardvark for the Ohio Scientific Computer], not so much for the game but for the adventure writing treatise that came with it – the first inkling of the structuring used behind adventure games and simple techniques like foldbacks and simple parser design. I guess early games that blew me away were several early Infocom adventures, the classics like *Zork*.

Aged 14 Clive began to write and chose games as it was the subject that fascinated him the most. In 1982 Michael Orwin released a series of compilation cassettes for the ZX81, and it was writing about these games that Gifford received his first published review. It was a big step into a new world.

[Clive] I didn't think this would necessarily lead anywhere, but the boom in home computing provided an outlet and the industry was so open, unstructured and unstuffy. Young people were actively encouraged and listened to. We were probably promoted above our station or our ideas given more attention than they sometimes deserved, due to our age.

Following the ZX81, Clive obtained a Dragon 32. After enjoying more adventures, specifically Mike Meineck's *Crystal Chalice of Quorom* [published by Dungeon Software in 1983] he submitted further reviews to magazine and was surprised with an offer of a regular dedicated adventure column for The Dragon User Club's magazine. He called it Ventures.

[Clive] I wrote about adventure gaming and reviewed the latest offerings. I loved the thud of jiffy bags hitting the door mat! And, to be honest, reviewing a glut of titles was a great gaming education. You get to see what works and what doesn't really fast through comparison. I recall the standard rising in those couple of years but also a lot of titles which were slick technically for the time but perhaps lacked the detail or atmosphere of the classic adventures from the US.

The step from writing about other people's games, to writing about how best to construct and design games was a small one. Taking his lead from Trevor Tom's Pocket ZX81 book and documented adventure systems, he learned how arrays, object tables and conditional event tables could be used to produce a re-usable engine.

[Clive] Trevor's system was the first annotated and explained adventure game listing that I got my hands on. [...] I had been constructing my first adventures but in a very haphazard fashion, structure-wise. So, it was a bit of an eye-opener.

Clive contributed listings for his own adventures and quickly found himself on the other side of the authoring equation. At the start of 1982, a gentleman by the name of Tim Hartnell made contact, and the combination of their talents provided a catalyst for a publishing partnership that would influence a generation.

[Clive] Tim got in touch with me after I had produced a few reviews for his magazine, Interface. [...] He hadn't been running Interface for long, but his business partner, Liz North, lived in the same town as me, Ashford in Surrey. I think I initially wrote formally so sounded quite old and world-weary rather than the breathless teenager I was, so Tim was surprised to discover I was 15. We met up and discussed plans over a West London Chinese meal if memory serves, and got on very well. Tim was looking for writers with an interest in computing rather than out-and-out programmers who perhaps were not convincing writers or game designers, as his focus was on books not cassette software.

INSPIRING LEGENDS

Industry legend David Perry, who founded Shiny Entertainment, created Earthworm Jim, and spearheaded cloud gaming with Gaikai started his career writing ZX-81 programs for Tim Hartnell's *National ZX User's Club magazine*.

Perry was paid £450 for his efforts, and after meeting Hartnell was invited to contribute a chapter to one of Tim's upcoming books. His work ended up being well enough received that he was later asked to write a book of his own, and the 32 page *Astounding Arcade Games for Your Spectrum+ & Spectrum* went on sale in 1985 for £1.25.

Clive started writing for Tim by adding instructional parts of books for other authors that were more into programming than providing clarity to the reader about how to construct and describe code. He contributed a few minor programs to fill gaps and it wasn't too long before Interface morphed into a fully fledged publisher, Interface Publications. Gifford was then offered the chance to author an entire book, *Making The Most of Your Dragon 32*. It was published around the time of his 17th birthday.

[Clive] Interface was having a lot of early success as a book publisher but Tim was smart enough to place series of books created by us with bigger, more established general publishers like Virgin Books, Harper-Collins and Addison-Wesley in the US. I'd be finding myself wearing an ill-fitting suit sitting in swish offices of big publishers, appearing on live TV and being interviewed by the press and thinking, what the hell is happening? I hadn't even sat my A Levels yet!

Though a lesser home micro in the playgrounds of Britain, Clive developed an early love affair for his Dragon 32. The machine did boast a good array of text adventures, and it was for the Welsh computer that he penned his first adventure book in 1983, *Creating Adventures on the Dragon 32*.

Clive purposely designed his adventures using well-structured, and easy-to-understand BASIC. He went further than many contemporary adventure books by offering advice beyond programming; including chapters on creativity, narrative and creation of puzzles. In one book he even included a random character name generator as one of the listings.

[Clive] From submissions from amateurs to reviews of some professional software, it became apparent that some authors were putting far more into the technical programming of a game than the gameplay. But it's the balanced and interesting gameplay that sees players return. I took a few hints from board games and how they balance risk and reward, gave players chances, introduce chance but also leave room for skill and knowledge. Some lovely programs from a technical perspective we encountered were let down by lame jokes, puzzles that were impossible or far-too-easy or perfunctory storytelling. I think some people just needed a nudge to show how they needed to push themselves on the creativity and narrative fronts. The random name generator was not so much for direct use as much as a demonstration of thinking more creatively about your characters and the game world they inhabit.

From the Dragon, Clive moved over to pen *Adventures for your ZX Spectrum*, and *More Adventures for Your ZX Spectrum*. Clive played a host of games on Sinclair's new machine such as Bulldog Software's *Rigel's Revenge* and Incentive Software's *Mountains of Ket*. And whilst everyone he knew was playing *The Hobbit,* his aversion to Tolkien meant he didn't pay it much attention. He did, however, recall that "many were trying to find that bloomin' sundial" in Mel Croucher's fantastically surreal *PiMania*.

In 1985, Interface Publications expanded and signed a partnership deal with Richard Branson and head of Virgin Books, John Brown, to produce computing books for them. Clive worked at Virgin for a short time in their offices overlooking a London canal.

[Clive] In fact, overspill offices were barges moored on the canal. It was an eccentric office environment and a real eye-opener for a teenager from the sticks.

His partnership with Tim continued to flourish, and they began to edit their own series of books in the Adventures range (one targeting the classic British home computer, the BBC Micro) and publishing commissioned titles that began to arrive in the Interface offices - such as Bob Liddil's "electrifying compendium of 15 BASIC adventures" – *Castles and Kingdoms for the Commodore 64.*

[Clive] Tim and I sifted through a raft of submissions from wannabe game writers. I think Tim ran competitions and adverts in some of the leading computing press at the time. The submissions started out as a trickle but became a flood. The standard varied enormously as you'd expect and on more than one occasion, I found my own clumsy coding now masquerading under a new title as a submission.

With the quality of the adventure pitches so varied, Tim and Clive spent a large amount of time using their experience to make the submissions better, trying to be as helpful as they could with constructive feedback. They tried to help wannabe authors develop their ideas and refine the location descriptions, instructions, and puzzle chains to make their adventures more consistent and fair.

[Clive] A lot of programmers couldn't understand that players might think differently to themselves or not follow their ambiguous instructions or commands to the letter. The beauty of good adventure writing is to understand that your audience is varied and may come at problems from different angles so you need your puzzles and plotting to take this into account and be flexible when they can.

They accommodated the vast range of micros available on the British market by transposing the code across the various formats – though in some cases elements had to be rewritten. Clive took a loathing to Commodore's particular brand of BASIC but was always open to tinkering with the latest micros that hit the market. With the fast-moving cycle of introduction and obsolescence of computers in the 1980s it was a delicate balance to decide which platforms would receive any coverage.

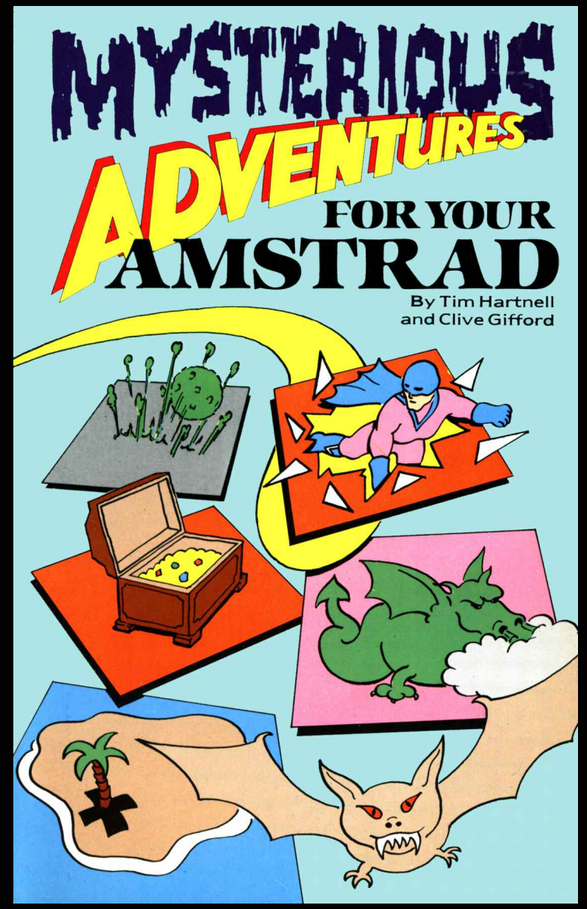
[Clive] We were trying to predict which machines would be a hit and then trying to back our decisions by getting to grips with the new machine. I think what has been forgotten about that time was just how quickly things were moving. It was the Wild West - all so new and unpredictable. Small cottage companies could compete with giant corporations – at least for a short spell. New computers were springing up seemingly every month as well as peripherals which promised to address a failing in a previous machine that might possibly make it more of a contender at the top table. [...] With the lag between completing a manuscript and its publication being multiple months, you could end up publishing a book for a computer that was already yesterday's news.

Tim's status and connections were such that he often appeared in the Interface offices with a pre-production model of a new machine. When the Amstrad CPC464 arrived, Clive realised that it could be one of the most affordable and durable home computers to reach the market. He embraced Alan Sugar's machine, and penned a book that would become one of his most fondly remembered - *The Pentacle Adventure Creator*, published in 1985.

[Clive] Tim asked for the title [of *Pentacle*] to sound a little mystical and fantasy-like. I remember seeing the word on an album cover for an early 1970s French prog rock band and liking it.

Pentacle was designed to allow authors to create games without the need to write their own programs. It was written in BASIC, and specifically designed to be as accessible as possible. It was a simple engine that could be customised by entering a different adventure data set for locations, objects, monsters and messages.

[Clive] [...] There were increasingly sophisticated commercial software adventure creators being brought out, some of which required a lot of knowledge and effort to use, so a BASIC program listing was never going to compete with them nor was it designed to. I was interested more in getting people who played adventures into thinking about creating their own. *Pentacle* was simple and not very elegant, but it offered a way for people, who perhaps weren't confident with programming, to get up and running. Part of deliberately using BASIC at the time was that listings felt transparent; readers could pull your program apart, use elements in their own creations and gain that understanding. This was a big part of Tim's plans for books – to let people in. The main aim was to create something that allowed people to populate their own adventure games with personalised elements, challenges and puzzles.



[Above] Mysterious Adventures for your Amstrad explored hybrid text adventures by implementing different game mechanics.

Pentacle was not designed to produce games that could rival *The Quill* or *GAC* or provide authors with a means of creating commercial grade adventures. It was designed to be an introduction into the construction and processes of an adventure engine. The easy to understand framework was a receptacle for a fertile imagination, and Tim and Clive were keen on promoting the idea of adventure game creation for everyone.

[Clive] Graeme [Yeandle]'s *The Quill* [...] was a big deal especially its version on the Spectrum. My inspiration for *Pentacle* came from a series of US computing articles, one by Ken Reed, and a few others, the authors' names escape me, on creating games frameworks as well as Trevor Toms in the first place and the programming notes to *Death Ship*.

Keeping *Pentacle* short, simple, and affordable (the book retailed at just £2.99) made it a pocket money purchase and as cheap to buy as a budget game for many children.

As a demonstration of the system, and to give readers even more inspiration and value for money, Clive included two fully working

[Opposite] Many of Interface Publications' books featured stunning cover illustrations, including many pieces by renowned games artist David Rowe.

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adventures to type in. The first, set in medieval times, was called *Castle of Doom*, and the second, to demonstrate the rudimentary graphics capabilities of *Pentacle* was called *The Search for SPECK*.

[Clive] I liked [graphics] to be honest and knew that even a little multimedia might lure more players in. Some of the earlier games that went graphical did so at the expense of the descriptions. Their graphics could be a hindrance and got in the way of the adventure. I preferred occasional use of graphics and sound for impact. In games where when you find a spell, scroll or encounter a major event, a graphic representation reinforces the point to the player that what they've found or unlocked is a big deal. I did think that less was more at the time. Sound was slow to be well-used in my opinion. I preferred well-timed and sparing sound effects to an underlying music soundtrack which could be tinny and cheesy.

Famed videogame artist David Rowe created several pieces of artwork for Interface, one of which was used as the cover of *Pentacle*. Clive's love for the Fighting Fantasy series of gamebooks was also mirrored inside, with a series of beautiful line drawings depicting various monsters and other characters.

[Clive] I loved David's dragon perched on top of the cottage picture and meant to buy it from Tim but never did. I wonder if David Rowe still has a copy? If the budget allowed, it felt really important as you wanted those illustrations to help set the tone and atmosphere of what were either text-only adventures or adventures with highly limited and very simple graphics. Obviously, Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone were huge influences at the time so the Fighting Fantasy-styled artwork was a deliberate homage.

In Computer & Videogames Magazine, the adventure master Keith Campbell (himself not a stranger to writing adventure guides) commented that "[*Pentacle*] is well written and easy to follow" and that it represented "good value" for money. It was welcome praise from one of the industry's greatest adventure luminaries.

[Clive] Well, that was kind of Keith. The book was cheap and, on reflection, we should have published it on cassette instead, which would have allowed a more expansive and more feature-packed version. I would have liked to have offered a more modular approach so that readers could expand their own gameworlds.

Alongside the potential of a cassette release, a faster, machine code version of the engine was started but never finished. Despite being responsible for several books on machine code, and particular one on *Pentacle's* target machine – *Machine Code Routines for the Amstrad*, Clive didn't get a chance to fully realise *Pentacle* into a more polished and faster utility.

[Clive] I even started coding it properly, but things were moving so fast that by the time *Pentacle* was published as a book, it wasn't clear whether CPC users would be interested in such a utility six months later. [...] A bigger, more powerful and modular *Pentacle* would have been great for the PC or other machines but by that time, I have to say, I was more interested in taking my ideas away from programming to other areas. I had had a couple of Choose Your Own Adventure books published by Virgin which were set in true, historical eras rather than in fantasy worlds, and was thinking on building on that - although I never quite did.

Mysterious Adventures for Your Amstrad was his last adventuring book for Virgin, released in 1985. It was by far his most ambitious title, exploring a realm of different approaches to writing and constructing adventures – from algorithmically creating mazes and locations, to multiple-choice pathways and a slant to role-playing-game style of gaming.

[Clive] I did enjoy a well-written, in-depth text adventure. I felt you got more into the game and subsequently got more from it,

providing it was well-plotted. I would have liked to see a few more commercial games which included multiple elements such as a graphic maze section within a predominantly text adventure. I'm sure they arrived after I departed the scene.

All of Clive's books sold extraordinarily well. Many sold over 50,000 copies and a rare few managed sales over 100,000. It was a remarkable achievement for a writer still at such a young age. The royalties helped fund his years through university, support his family, and financed several adventures of his own travelling to many exotic places around the world; included Easter Island, Ecuador and Japan.With him opting to be paid via advances, rather than more lucrative royalties, the reward for such success wasn't as great financially as it could have been. There was always a thought that his talents could have produced several very successful commercial adventure games of his own.

[Clive] I very nearly did. I was asked to develop an idea of mine – *The Dionysius Files* – by a well-known software house. They paid for a few months of ideas, demos and plot building. It was huge for the time, would have come as a cassette trilogy or on multiple floppies and was predominantly set in two alternating worlds – present day London, above and below ground, including the ghost stations abandoned on the London Underground, and in ancient Greek city-states. So, there was a mixing of ancient Greek reality and mythology along with many tropes and aspects of London and its past and present. The funniest thing is that it had elements of gods hidden in plain sight in modern London which when I read Neil Gaiman's American Gods, decades later, thought, "aha, that's what I was trying to do in places" - but obviously nowhere near as well as Mr Gaiman.

Dionysius took on epic proportions, and Clive filled five A4 notebooks with puzzles and ideas, mapping out a journey that had multiple paths, an everchanging protagonist, and at least three different endings. As a homage to Infocom, the player would also have to interact with physical artefacts included with the package and an accompanying book.

[Clive] The software house were keen on my direction but I just couldn't combine the intensive work it needed with my university degree so had to abandon it. A great shame. One of the few regrets I have from that time.

Interestingly, in a gap year before university Clive also founded and operated a small company games company called Mikro Leisure. He ran it in parallel to his book writing with a friend, Scott Vincent who was a machine code programmer who produced smooth and fast arcade games for the ZX81 computer. One game was *Space Caves*, a *Defender* clone that had 50 screens of fast-scrolling action compressed into an astoundingly small 12KB.

[Clive] [...] Scott really was that good. [...] I helped shape the games a bit but instead of selling them to a games company, we decided to form our own, spent a fortune duplicating and taking out adverts in the national computing press and then realised we had to post, package and account for hundreds of games cassette orders. My tireless mother was the real hero here, acting as office manager. We probably should have sold *Space Caves* to a proper company – Scott may have made more money – but it was great experience.

In retrospect, Clive and Tim, as Interface Publications made an immeasurable contribution to home computing and early videogames. Their influence changed the lives of many youngsters and inspired them to pursue a career or interest in technology. Throughout the 1980s Hartnell continued to push the boundaries of experimental software. He explored creating artificial intelligence and procedurally generated adventures on the Commodore 64, Apple II, and the later IBM PC computers. Tragically, after returning to Australia, his life was cut short in 1991 due to cancer.

[Clive] [...] I miss him to this day. Tim was an amazing person, very intelligent and charismatic. He packed a lot into his short life, including being a TV newsreader in Australia, before he'd come to London at the end of the 1970s. The singularly most inspiring thing about Tim was his multi-faceted interests. He wasn't just a home computer obsessive, he was fascinated by history, by media, the future, current affairs and music. As a teenager, it was like having a super-knowledgeable and inspiring older brother. Some of my tastes and views in areas away from computing were shaped by him whilst his views on computing were hugely influential. My interest in the field definitely dwindled when he moved back to Australia in 1985. We kept in touch and I was so sad and shock to hear of his death. [...] He was only 40. Such a shame.

Clive Gifford stands as one of Britain's most unique and talented authors. In his remarkable life and career as a journalist and writer he's authored more than 150 children's books including Eye Benders, winner of the Royal Society Young People's Book Prize, Royal Society-nominated Out of This World and Cool Technology which won the School Library Association Information Book Award. His book, The Colours of History, won the Blue Peter Book Awards' Best Book With Facts.

[Clive] Winning the Royal Society Young People's Book Prize was an obvious [career] highlight. Watching 1,000 people file in after paying to listen to me speak at the Hay Festival was probably the most surreal. Last year's Blue Peter award on live TV was great. I've been lucky enough for awards to have come for my books every few years. They're serious morale boosters and help convince you that you are working along the right lines.

He's now working on a new series of computing books for Wayland, due for release in late 2020. With the children of the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One generation, the challenges for getting young people into the world of computing has changed dramatically.

[Clive] They're commentaries on how computing works as opposed to the specific, practical guides and program listings of the past. I don't expect them to have much of an impact outside of the school library to be honest – that's how the world has changed. [...] Today's kids, if they program or code themselves, tend to do so in very user-friendly environments such as Scratch or Blockly. I envy them but hope they get to wrestle with problems of usability and problems of programming your way round a system's limited resources. It can encourage good programming. Ultimately, the books I wrote back in the 1980s used the games they contained as vehicles for conveying how BASIC and the home computers it ran on could be harnessed by people who didn't think of themselves as programmers to create their own games, programs and utilities.

Clive maintains an extensive homepage at www.clivegifford.co.uk that contains a wealth of biographical and other information, and is on Twitter @CliveWrites.

DESERT ISLAND DUNGEONS

Clive Gifford jumps into the lifeboat and escapes the stricken research vessel SS Interface. Now marooned on a deserted island, he has just five text adventures to help retain his sanity.

1. *Zork I* (Amstrad CPC)
Not a controversial choice I imagine but I'd like to return to it and see how it feels today. As far as I recall, it had good mystery, atmospheric descriptions, fiendish puzzles in places and only gradually released the story to the player.

2. *Madness and the Minotaur* (Dragon 32, TRS-80)
For the nostalgia - it was the first real-time adventure I played and enjoyed although it could be brutal and you seemed to die a little too often for my liking. Its 256 rooms were enough to explore.

3. *The Pawn* (Sinclair QL)
I'd get round the text-only stipulations by using Rob Steggle's original QL version. Good game, brilliant parser allowed you to play around with your text input more than most. Mind you, the prospect of using a QL again, on a desert island or anywhere else, leaves me a bit queasy.

4. *Amnesia* (PC)
Stuck on a desert island would mean you'd probably no longer mind how it takes an age to get through certain parts of this adventure but that would still leave you time to enjoy Thomas Disch's rich writing and descriptions and to play a modern (well, 1980s) New York-based game.

5. *Planetfall* (Amstrad CPC)
Was tempted to try out one of the new breed of IF adventures or *Suspect* but have opted for this classic as it would be interesting to see how, a few decades on, I'd react to dear old Floyd – the game's robot sidekick.

VALKYRIE 17

A series of mysterious and frantic answerphone messages, a dossier of top secret blueprints and memos, and a group of Nazis calling themselves Valkyrie 17 building a new vergeltungswaffen to resurrect the Fourth Reich. The Classic Adventurer recruits MI6 operative **Tony Barber** and whispers in his ear, "The Red Kipper Flies at Midnight."

Format: ZX Spectrum and Commodore 64
Publisher: Palace Virgin Gold Software
Developer: The RamJam Corporation
Release Date: December 1984

Tony Barber left school at 16 and pursued an apprenticeship as a telephone service engineer. He moved between jobs over the next few years, changing from telephone systems to an eventual job servicing photocopying units. His life changed when a friend sold him his first computer, a white Sinclair ZX80 and he started to enjoy programming home micros as a hobby.

He had always talked about technology with colleagues, and several of his work friends discussed having access to a text adventure program on one of the corporate workstations called *ADVENT*. It

[Below] Some of the atmospheric answerphone messages building the tense start of Valkyrie 17.

“ Hello, hello? Damn, it's one of those machines. Look, Heinrich is still alive. I've just seen him and Reichsmuller boarding The Star of India. I'm going to follow them. I've managed to get a cabin and ... they're raising the gangplank, I've got to go. Valkyrie 17 is still active. I repeat. Valkyrie 17 is still active. I'll contact you again, same time tomorrow. ”

“ I'm at the Glitz Hotel, Reichsmuller is here. Which means that Heinrich is *BANG* The Red Kipper Flies At Midnight. Your contact will identify himself by the words The Red Kipper Flies At Midnight. Valkyrie 17 is critical. I repeat. Valkyrie 17 is ... ”

sparked Tony's interest in the genre, and he upgraded the ZX80 to a ZX81 and bought several commercial programs including *Adventure C, The Ship of Doom*, written by Charles Cecil. His early attempts at programming were fruitful, and he sold several games to The Buffer Micro Shop on Streatham High Road in London. Buffer had started life as a computer game retailer, but branched out into publishing software, including text adventures *Buffer Adventure* and *Mysterious Playground*.

It was a still just a hobby, and Tony made an infrequent pound or two from his games through the small shop. Buffer had a selection of computing books in stock and one title caught Tony's eye - it was Trevor Tom's ZX81 Pocket Book. Included inside was Trevor's code for a reusable adventure creation system and a complete documented adventure called *The City Alzan*.

[Tony] I saw the ZX81 Pocket Book in the shop and flicked through it and saw [the article on how to] create your own adventure. Wow! I got it and played with it on my ZX81 and wrote a small 30 room adventure. [Once I] got the new ZX Spectrum [I] transferred the ZX81 code to [it] and got it to work.

Tony did a little research and found that Phipps, the publisher of the Trevor Tom's book, had also moved into games publishing. He noticed that Phipps had specifically released several games based upon the very same adventure system used for *The City of Alzan*. He purchased Mike Farley's *Knight's Quest* – publicised as using the system - so he could evaluate a commercial version and investigate the underlying code.

[Tony] I got *Knights Quest* because it was by Phipps and hacked into it to see what made it tick. I saw it was the same as the ZX81 code with split screen graphics. I ripped the graphics routines out and put them into my adventure system based on the ZX81 code.

Tony's 30-room adventure was quickly updated with the new graphics routines and he modified the BASIC code of his Spectrum engine by converting several of the parsing routines into fast machine code. He called the eventual game *Island Adventure*.

[Tony] There were no influences, and it was about travelling by boat to an island and then returning with treasure to an Uncle. [I] can't remember much about it now except it was just a test adventure to get my editing system working.

He packaged the game up and sent it into Phipps to see if they would be interested in his abilities as an adventure writer. Trevor Toms himself reviewed the submission and on evaluation thought *Island Adventure* was too short for publication. But, he could see the potential in Tony's skills and so he invited Tony to expand on his ideas and write a more substantial adventure for consideration.

[Tony] Trevor gave me the green light to do a full adventure, so I thought for a while about its subject. At the time I was keen on a board game by I think Parker called Colditz [a strategy card and dice-based board game released in 1973] and based the adventure on its rooms. I decided to not make [the challenge to] escape but [instead] break in and retrieve.

In April 1984, Phipps published *Colditz* for the 48K Spectrum to encouraging reviews. Keith Campbell complimented the game on its fast responses and the pleasant graphics which accompanied most of the 70+ locations. The legendary adventuring journalist thought Barber's first efforts resulted in a "competent adventure". It was encouragement to continue writing and after penning several arcade games for Phipps, including *House of the Dead* [a maze game released in 1983] and *Killer Knight* [a platformer published in 1983] Tony started on a new adventure provisionally calling it *The Star of India*.

In September 2006, Tony was interviewed by Jacob Gunness for The Classic Adventures Solution Archive and recalled that the inspiration for *India* came from his wife. He asked her for ideas for a possible adventure scenario and his wife proposed a spy thriller set on a snowy mountain, with a large diamond to steal or find. It certainly shared some elements in common with the Pink Panther comedy mystery films, starring Peter Sellers, as the game also involved the theft of a titular diamond - in this case the The Star of India.

[Tony] She had been reading a book about two bumbling guys that managed to get hold of a bag of money belonging to the Mafia and went on the run when they realised [who it belonged to]. They ended up in a sky lodge where most of the book took place. I used the idea of the ski lodge to base the adventure where you had to steal a rare diamond, The Star of India.

Tony started designing, laying out around 20 or so locations, all interconnected with direction of movement on a map and a brief description of each room or setting. As he worked through the scenario for *India* he eventually accounted for around 100 rooms, imaging what could occur in the each of the locations, building on the narrative and then fleshing out the potential puzzles.

The initial draft of *India* was submitted to Phipps with the hope that it would be published. *Knight's Quest* author Mike Farley had continued to write further adventures for publication, so Tony was encouraged that his game would follow onto retail shelves.

[Tony] [...] I sent it to Trevor just before he decided to leave Phipps. It was complete with text and graphics. I was originally going to have illustrations in every location and verbose room descriptions but ran out of memory - so I cut back on my room pictures and room descriptions. I wanted to leave long messages within the game as that is at the heart of a good adventure.

The roots of Trevor Toms leaving Phipps can be traced back to the start of 1984. Trevor was introduced to George Stone, a writer, radio producer and commercial maker working with a selection of record companies in the heart of London. He was interested in a wide range of media, including the "landscape of television" [he'd later go onto co-create Max Headroom] and was a devout fan of text adventures having fallen in love with the genre after playing Infocom's *Zork*. Trevor and George hit it off, and Trevor decided to part company with Phipps and setup a new development studio called the RamJam Corporation.

[Tony] [George] always greeted you with "How the devil are you?". He was very interesting and had great ideas. I remember he loved The Star of India. He could sell anything to anybody. His biggest flaw was he kept selling computer game ideas to companies and taking money in advance to get the ball rolling. There was only so much I could do in a day.

Trevor and George invited Tony to join RamJam and offered him a lead programming role with the company. He would be their first employee. Since no contract had been signed with Phipps for *The Star of India*, its code, and intellectual property rights were transferred over to the new company. Using the funds from George's Max Headroom project, and Trevor's royalties and earnings from Phipps they expanded RamJam to a second employee and hired artist Simon Dunston.

Announcements about the new company started to appear in the gaming press in late 1984, with a new adventure game touted as their first release. George Stone told Micro Adventurer magazine in November that the aspiration for RamJam was to match the quality of adventures released by Infocom. Accompanying the publicity about the new game was a bizarre series of PR shots with RamJam signing a publishing agreement for distribution rights with Peter Stone of Palace Software. For what would later be a very serious first release, it was baffling seeing the game previewed in such a comic fashion, with some magazines suggesting the title was a "hilarious new adventure." Several articles added mystery to this new software house, by stating that the head of the company was a "Sir Oswestry Malvinas".

[Tony] [That was a] made up name [by] George. I don't know if it worked.

Putting the PR stunts to one side, Tony and George worked together to refine *The Star of India's* storyline. George suggested several changes, including setting the game not long after The Second

World War and centring the plot around the rise of the Fourth Reich. A pair of Nazis, Ernst Reichsmuller and a shadowy character called Henriech, who both had evaded capture at the end of the war, were intent of building a new super-weapon [powered by lasers requiring a certain diamond] and holding the world to ransom.

[Tony] It was never a war adventure, as it was a diamond heist. [...] George was great to work with we talked a lot on the phone about the way it should go. [...] George wanted it to be post-war and the diamond was part of a weapon to shoot planes from the sky. I was up for that. He noticed my room descriptions were a little short, so he changed some of the characters names in the game and lengthened the room descriptions.

Tony told Jacob Gunness and CASA that George's version of the game and his original India were "identical in room locations, pictures and puzzled." Despite the minor changes to the plot, the setting remained intact with the protagonist venturing around the locations of a glamorous hotel and skiing resort, encountering a set of nefarious characters.

The Star of India was renamed *Valkyrie 17* by George, giving the game a mythical code name that befitted the games plot, and hinted an alleged shadowy organisation, or secret committee of military leaders that existed in popular subculture. As development progressed, Tony refined the adventure engine from *Colditz* using an Amstrad computer, compiling the code and sending it down a serial cable to a connected ZX Spectrum.

The evolution of the Trevor Tom's *Adventure System*, developed further in *Colditz* and *Valkyrie 17*, would go on to become *The Biro* - an in-house tool used by RamJam to create adventures.

[Tony] Yes very much so. It wouldn't be for another year before I wrote *The Biro*. This was all my work but was heavily influenced from what had gone before. The idea was anyone could use *The Biro* to create an adventure. It was a complete system including a test runtime.

To achieve better performance from the evolving adventure engine, Trevor Toms stepped in to assist Tony. Trevor had helped before as the fledging programmer struggled to grasp machine code and converted some of his original arcade games written in BASIC to use a compiler to run at greater speeds. For *Valkyrie 17* the challenge was squashing the data down to fit into the small confines of the ZX Spectrum's memory. Trever recalled modifying the engine to include a highly sophisticated text compression mechanism and the ability to target areas of the screen to export text which allowed for some neat split-screen layouts.

[Tony] We both came up with text compression algorithms. [My approach was that] every unique word was stored in a database and given a 2-byte number, and then the text was stored as a line of 2-byte numbers pointing into the database. This means you only had to store each word once and the main text was just a list of 2-byte numbers. This [compressed the] text down about 50%.

Trevor added the ability to split the text between the graphics display and a windowing system that could be easily manipulated to fit several screen layouts. Tony's 42-character proportional font was also incorporated into the engine. He'd previously written the utility for an electronic magazine distributed on cassette called Spectrum Computing by Argus Press. He put that in the code, along with additional overlaid graphical effects and the ability for limited sound and music.

[Tony] I [also] wanted [Biro] to be in real time so if you are in a room [a character] might walk in and demand you leave or a [character enters] the room and throws a knife if you don't react in time, [or] picks up the knife, etc. This I put into *The Biro 2*.

Unlike most adventures, *Valkyrie 17* came with brief instructions, just a cursory plot description on the rear of the packaging setting the scene and an increasingly frantic set of audio answerphone messages ending with a gunshot and a pained voice gasping, "The Red Kipper flies at midnight".

But first, you had to navigate past the game's piracy puzzle. Piracy was always commented on as being rife in the industry and publishers felt the need to combat it using an increasingly sophisticated array of methods – from high-speed loaders whose audio and pitch frequencies would bamboozle tape-to-tape copying machines, to bundling physical anti-piracy devices such as Lenslok (a Level 9 favourite) in the box. *Valkyrie 17* pursued a more simplistic approach and brazenly asked the player if they were playing a pirated version of the game. On entering YES, the computer rebooted. Of course, you could always load the game back in, and then enter NO - so it was an annoyance, but perhaps not the best anti-piracy method ever devised. It obviously reflected the frustrations that the developers felt as on the back of the packaging, alongside the usual copyright message, was the sarcastic subtitle, "Although why we bother heaven only knows."

[Tony] [That] was George's idea, I loved it.

Once past the copy protection, the adventure starts in the dimly lit and smoky lobby bar of the Glitz Hotel. At the bar, there is an attractive girl who requires a drink.

The unfolding storyline is excellent and contains plenty of humour, although thankfully not as extreme as the initial public relations blurb would have led players to believe. There is a nice balance between the pacing, tension and comedic elements. Memorable amusing characters include the maid that dusts you down and the old lady who encourages a playground fight.

[Tony] I liked the skinny butcher and trying to get the meat and when you got done by the radiation!

It takes a while to get into the game, the majority of the lengthy first act is all about trying to find a way out of the hotel without paying the bill. There's a small set of locations but there's plenty to do. You must also explore the snowy landscape outside and acquire enough money to buy the aforementioned mysterious woman a drink at the bar. If you succeed then you eventually hear someone whisper the game's secret phrase "the red kipper flies at midnight" – thus exposing one secret agent to another.

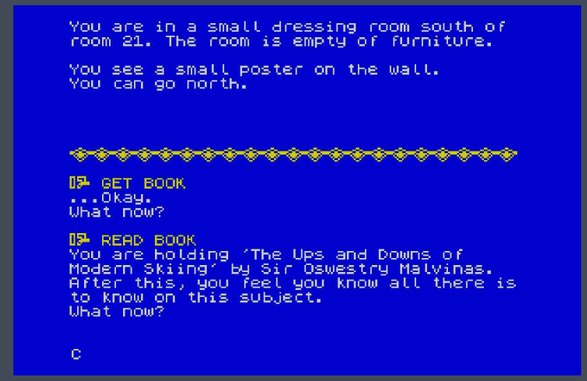
The second act sees the player escape the hotel grounds and slopes completely. They enter the local town, then depart via the RamJammer Yacht and journey to the Schloss Drakenfield where they recover the *Valkyrie Diamond*. It is then a quick dash to the airport to commandeer an old aircraft and make good their escape into the clouds. There's still the matter of delivering the diamond, so in true secret agent style, the climatic conclusion draws on an extraordinary set-piece straight from the pages of James Bond. The agent leaps from the plane and back down to the hotel. It's super-cheesy and cliched, but fun – even though It feels like the ending had been hastily written.

[Tony] No I liked that idea. It was just a way to get back.

Simon Dunstan contributed to *Valkyrie 17's* workmanlike graphics and fine loading screen. It was reported that the engine capabilities were a combination of character-set based graphics and plot, line, and fill. There is an efficient use of character solid backgrounds, overlaid with line techniques that means that the resultant images are drawn quickly enough to be compared to those rendered with *The Quill*. The game was released on the Spectrum and C64 and given the extra CPU speed the screens are drawn fastest on the Speccy. When processing the player's input the roles are reversed, with the C64 version of the game giving an instant response, over the slight delay on the Spectrum due to the scrolling proportional routines implemented by Tony. In addition, the odd bleep and blop of sound does not add much to the gameplay, and they are an annoyance more than anything so could have been omitted.

The illustrations add context and depth to the locations and often must be examined closely to find objects not mentioned in the text and other clues in the adventure. Because of the basic nature of the graphics it could be difficult for the novice adventurer to identify the exact object needed. This is noticeable early in the game when you enter an "impeccably tidy bedroom" that clearly from the graphics

[Above] *Valkyrie 17's* opening gambit. Obligatory to every good spy thriller is a smoky bar, the consumption of alcoholic cocktails and the companionship of a beautiful woman.

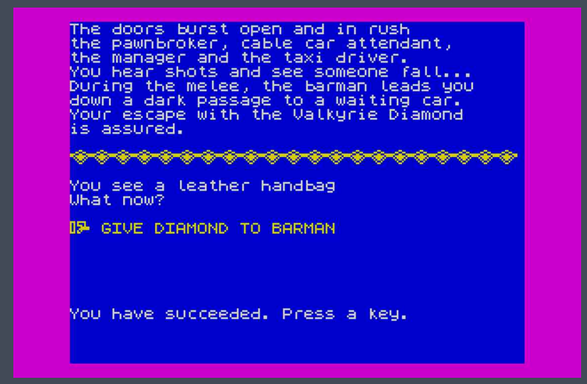


[Above] Once you manage to escape the Glitz Hotel, finding a book entitled The Ups and Downs of Modern Skiing could be vital to navigating around the glamorous snowy mountainside locations.

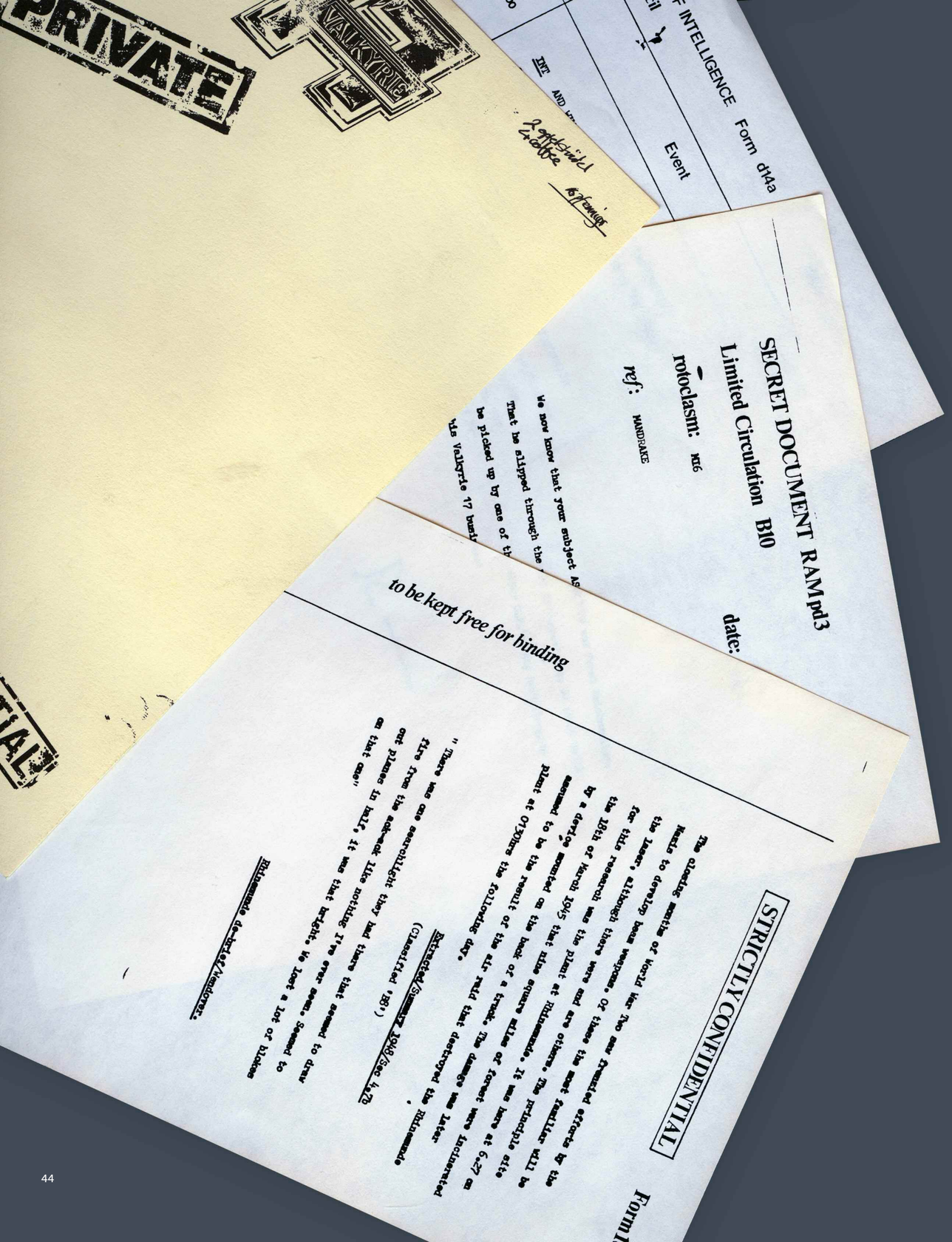
[Above] One of the very few niggles with Tony Barber's adventure is the limited responses from the EXAMINE statement. Illustrations are used for specific objects and are often ommitted from the location text, making it hard for novices to progress.

[Above and Left] A neat feature of *Valkyrie 17's* graphics engine is the ability to show the result of manipulating objects and environments by changing the location illustration.

[Above] The climatic sequences to *Valkyrie 17*. Will our agent risk a flight in a suspect aircraft or find some other way out?



[Above] With the Valkyrie Diamond safe, and the threat from the sinister Valkyrie 17 agents neutralised, our hero makes good their escape.



has something on the wall. It could be a picture, and it is not broadcast to the player in the normal way via the command lines. The standard, default EXAMINE response [the EXAMINE command to the game's detriment yielded too few results] is given for just about every connotation of NOUN that you can think of; bed, bedroom, wall, painting, frame, etc, Even the correct object EXAMINE SAFE yields nothing of interest. It occurs later too, with various other objects that are not visible in the text, such as the ski poles placed outside the ski hut.

A positive feature of the graphics system is the interactivity of the illustrations – they change as a consequence of players commands. Smashing glass cases, opening windows, etc, are all reflected in redrawn location graphics. It doesn't happen on every occasion, for example hanging sheets from a hotel window in an early part of the game, but it's a really neat feature and reminiscent of the tricks used by artists such as Teoman Irmak [**see Issue 05**] and Shaun McClure [**see Issue 07**] in their adventures.

Valkyrie 17 received a Spectrum release in December 1984, with the Commodore 64 version appearing some four or five months afterwards - around May 1985. The C64 version seemed to have been a straight port, and it fared less well than its Z80 counterpart when it came to reviews. ZZap!64, noted that the EXAMINE function was substandard saying that the "lack of precision sometimes means that you're in danger of giving up on a particular puzzle even though you may be on the right track." Still, they praised the "exciting scenario" and "great sense of humour". Sally Glover in Micro Adventurer commented that "the game is fun", with "a unique and interesting plot". Derek Brewster, reviewing the Spectrum version in Crash was full of praise: "Valkyrie 17 is a joy to play", he exuberated, "colourful, very witty, [and] features many good quality graphics."

[Tony] I had tried to put a lot of humour in the game, but George added even more. I was quite pleased with his contribution.

What helped the reviews was the marketing support that Palace gave RamJam. They excelled with the production quality of the packaging, and *Valkyrie 17* leapt out from the Christmas shelves and stood out in the hands of reviewers. Every journalist commented on the box contents and with good reason. George had worked hard with Palace, channelling his love of Infocom and their pioneering "feelies", to produce a game box that was similarly packed with goodies. There was a comprehensive "top secret" dossier on the Valkyrie 17 organisation and blueprints for the superweapon. One side of the included data cassette included audio of a series of professionally recorded and atmospheric answerphone messages.

[Tony] Palace [as a publisher] were great, I worked with them a lot up in London at the Old Scala cinema when I did *Cauldron* on the Spectrum for them.

The least impressive part of the box was the cover artwork. Besides the impressive Valkyrie 17 insignia, produced in the black, white and red tricolour of the Third Reich, there was a painting of a ominous and moody mountain top with a lightning bolt hitting what can unfortunately be described as a crow, rather than an intimidating Reich Sadler - the recognisable Imperial Eagle symbol found in Nazi iconography. Nevertheless the otherwise impressive package was topped off by the inclusion of a sturdy metal badge [now a collector's item] matching the Valkyrie 17 insignia and stylised to invoke memories of actual Schutzstaffel [SS] military garb.

After the fanfare of *Valkyrie 17*, RamJam took on a more background role as a work-for-hire studio. Computer Gamer, Issue 21 in 1986 hinted that the high production costs of the game; the duplication expenses, badge costs, were too high and based upon sales targets that were unobtainable given that the adventure market had already started to contract. Reflecting on its success, Trevor Toms recalls that the game sold well, but does not remember seeing substantial royalties from the publisher. It still remains a firm favourite with players, and is fondly remembered. *Valkyrie 17* sits in the ratings as the 7th best adventure of all time on the respected World of Spectrum website.

In June 1985 RamJam left their relationship with Palace and signed a

[Above and left] Inspired by Infocom's *Zork*, RamJam included several high-quality "feelies" in the *Valkyrie 17* packaging including a comprehensive top-secret dossier and collectable metal badge.

licencing deal with Ariolasoft. A re-release of *Valkyrie 17* hit the shelves in a run-of-the-mill jewel cassette case that was missing the physical badge [though it was still available via mail order] and dossier "feelies".

After a mix-up over payments and tax returns Tony acrimoniously left RamJam.

Valkyrie 17's adventure system would eventually become the basis for *The Biro* and promoted as the in-house tool for future RamJam adventures. It would go onto be used to author *Twice Shy*, a computer version of Dick Francis' book [published by Mosaic Publishing], and the very impressive *The Terrors of Trantoss* – another ambitious Mike Farley game.

[Tony] When I wrote *The Biro* it was from scratch but based on the solid flow of the original ZX81 adventure program: Describe room. Check for auto events. Wait for input. Scan input. Do actions. And so on.

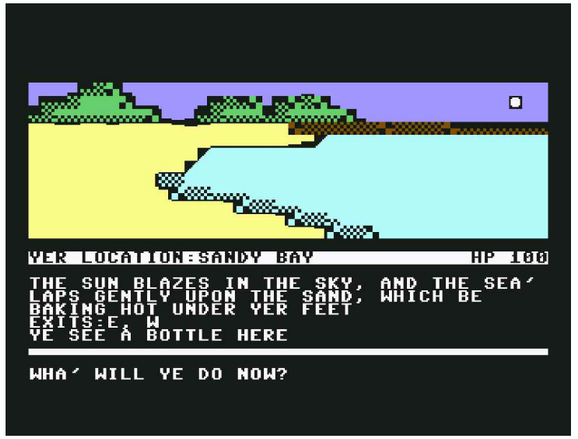
Whilst Tony was still with the company several rumoured sequels or follow-up adventures were rumoured in the press. *Holiday in Carpathia* was mooted as the follow-up game to *Valkyrie 17*, but was never mentioned as a sequel. Speculation again appeared in later articles that suggested the game was just called *Carpathia* and then in Sinclair User in 1986 as *Three Days in Carpathia.* Features such as the ability to "switch from character to character to influence the game's outcome" were mentioned as being part of the adventure engine – something that would be seen in *Terrors of Trantoss*. Mike Gerrard reported in Oct 86 that *Three Weeks in Carpathia* was not the follow-up to *Valkyrie 17*, but "a completely different adventure".

[Tony] I was never in discussions about a sequel to *Valkyrie 17*. *Carpathia* was by, I think, Mike Farley.

In September 2006, Jacob Gunness helped Tony playtest his PC remake of *Valkyrie 17* powered by a brand-new adventure engine dubbed *The Biro 2*. Coded in Liberty BASIC, the new version has unfortunately not been updated, so is no longer compatible with *Windows 10*, but it did include a much-improved parser, extended vocabulary, a new hint system and one or two re-worked and original puzzles.

SCURVY DOGS

Thomas Garner's pirate swashbuckler *Scurvy Dogs* channels inspiration from much-loved adventure type-in routines, including Usborne favourite Write Your Own Adventure Programs.



Format: Commodore 64
Developer: Thomas Garner
Price: Free
Website: https://tomgetsworse.itch.io/scurvy-dogs
Release Date: August 2018

Thomas Garner was drawing treasure maps with his four year old step-son when he realised that the locations, treasures and challenges they had both imagined would convert perfectly into a text adventure. Thomas himself had explored creating his own games as a kid, typing in adventure routines from Marshal Cavendish's INPUT magazine and Jenny Tyler and Les Howarth's Write Your Own Adventure Programs book on his TRS80 computer. So he took their pirate island designs and began programming for the Commodore 64, eventually ending up after three months of development with a game consisting of over 1000 lines of code, entirely written in BASIC.

The resultant game, *Scurvy Dogs,* is a fantastic homage to those early rudimentary, but highly enjoyable adventures. The well-trodden narrative is simple: You play the part of despicable pirate, off to Black Isle to plunder its infamous fabled Aztec treasure - the black spotted Statue o' Mictlantecuhtli. In a foul storm the ship's rigging is hit by lightening and is stranded on the island, with your mutinous crew having deserted the sinking ship. The game begins with you waking amidst the sand, after a particularly heavy night on the rum tasked with finding the treasure, repairing your ship and escaping. Said ship, the Breakin' Wind (a name only a Dad and his step-son can conjure) stands damaged a short way into the waves. It's from here you set off exploring its vast innards, as well as the maze-like long grass that surrounds the beaches and beyond into the rest of the island.

Scurvy Dogs is well worth checkingout. It has a wonderful aesthetic feel, a selection of nicely compiled PETSCII graphics and is brilliantly programmed, with only the shortest of delays due to the BASIC parsing. The vocabularly could be better, and objects need specific references here and there, but it's a highly enjoyable game reminiscent of *Twin Kingdom Valley* as you roam the Island avoiding instant deaths, drowning, cut-throat bandits, and thieves that steal your possessions.

The game is free as a digital download, though the author hints that a physical version may well be available to purchase in the future.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS

The Lord of the Rings trilogy of adventures was an epic undertaking led by Alfred Milgrom between 1986 and 1989. All three games were programmed by Beam Software, whose Fellowship included **Geoff Halprin**, **LynC**, **Norton Truter**, **John Haward** and **Paul Kidd**. The Classic Adventurer takes them on a journey from Hobbiton to the fiery pits of Mount Doom.

In 1982 Melbourne House's *The Hobbit* [**see Issue 01**] shattered the linear, text-only, verb-noun world of adventures with its extensive vocabulary, clever parser, branching narrative, intelligent characters and smatterings of colourful graphics. Remembered as one of the greatest games of all time, and with reputed sales in excess of 250,000 units, it was expected that the Australian publisher

and its development house Beam Software would ride this gigantic wave of success by delving further into the world of JRR Tolkien for a second game. To everyone's surprise, the expected Lord of the Rings follow-up was side-lined, with *The Hobbit* publisher (sans co-creator Veronika Megler) favouring a storyline based upon Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes instead.

The resultant *Sherlock* took 15 months to complete, and before the ink dried on magazine reviews, the news columns filled with the potential Lord of the Rings continuation as House started to drip rumours to journalists in the autumn of 1984. The brilliant *Sherlock* debuted at the Personal Computer World Show (alongside text adventure stablemates *Zim Sala Bim* and *Hampstead*) in October of the same year, and speculation about the Rings tie-in turned from possible to probable when head honcho Alfred Milgrom announced an initial option for a game with book publisher George Allen and Unwin. Allen and Unwin had just wrestled the rights to the books back from Saul Zaentz's US company Fantasy Films who held them since their 1978 animated film adaptation by Ralph Bakshi. Despite the media frenzy, House were quick to dampen the flames of excitement caused by the announcement with UK PR manager Paula Byrne saying that "it will be a long time before any game based on the work appears, [...] we have not yet begun to consider how we will approach it."

Nevertheless, Melbourne House chose to exercise the option given to them, and entered into close collaboration with the book publisher. David Fielder, editorial director, told Popular Computing Weekly, "Melbourne House will have editorial control over the game, within the rough guidelines, but obviously we will be closely involved on questions of concept and design." There was a realisation that the approach to development of games had to mature, and both parties wanted to learn the lessons from the protracted development of both *The Hobbit* and *Sherlock*. The task that lay ahead, converting a trilogy of books containing the best part of half a million words filling over

"Phil Mitchell decided to write *Lord of the Rings* in C. This presented an additional challenge - we found C compilers were far too inefficient"

1000 pages into a computer game was daunting. It was a logical decision to begin to split the task based upon the natural division of the book's three volumes: The Fellowship of the Ring, The Two Towers and The Return of the King. Even though games were far from his area of expertise, Fielder hypothesised on the approach that had to be taken by Mitchell and team: "I suspect a computer game on The Lord of the Rings in its entirety would be impossible", he commented, "it is more likely that more than one game will be produced, together with more than one book."

Three months later, at the start of 1985, Beam Software's lead programmer, 24 year old Philip Mitchell was enjoying a month long sabbatical from coding after the exhausting three year schedule of development that encapsulated *The Hobbit*, *Sherlock* and side-projects *Melbourne House Draw*, *Penetrator* and *Mugsy*.

Whilst Mitchell was away, pre-production on the first Rings game had started at Beam Software headquarters, located in Melbourne, Australia. Beam was housed in a converted inner-city industrial building, staffed by an eclectic group of coders, artists and musos. There was a free-spirited culture, built upon play, more akin to an adult playground than a place of work. The office was big, open plan, with music playing, animations running on computers, and the walls were adorned with posters, drawings, and cartoons. Dress was casual and schemes were pitched back and forth so that ideas thrived.

It was dubbed "Fred's Crèche" because founder Alfred Milgrom chose to recruit his development talent from surrounding universities where people were graduating with much-needed computer programming skills. He had taken on a spate of fresh-faced employees: Michael O'Rourke was drafted in as the adventure game equivalent of screenwriter, working on the mammoth task of translating the book into a workable narrative, alongside a programming recruit mysteriously named LynC.

LynC first became interested in computers from the age of 12 programming Fibonacci sequences on very early machines. She has no recollection of how she got the job at Beam, but joined because in her previous job as a Postwoman she sustained an injury and was looking for a more sedentary role. She became a programmer during development of *The Hobbit* and had worked alongside Mitchell on *Sherlock* provisioning the database system used to store scenarios and dialogue.

[LynC] Phil was a terrific person to work with. I learnt so much from him. He was a true problem solver and always took on board anything I had to add. He was always courteous and a genuinely interesting person to be with. We, and our respective partners, also did stuff outside the work environment like going skiing together. At least, Phil and my partner went skiing, I schlepped around on the beginner slopes.

As O'Rourke and LynC wrestled with the words, Mitchell returned from his break and was promoted to "Group Leader and Chief Programmer". He was handed a team of coders that included Danny Davis, Stephen Taylor, Doug Palmer and Louis Madon. Graphic artists Greg Holland and Russell Comte, who had worked with Mitchell on interactive gangster comic-strip *Mugsy*, completed the development line-up.

Geoff Halprin, who had led several development projects, including the well-loved *Horace Goes Skiing* [written by William Tang in 1982], took on the role of leading the internal support team. He became administrator of Beam's Z8000 and 68000 Unix machines and fledgling internal network, managing developer tools and productivity. The Beam studio was now rumoured to be the biggest development team outside of Japan and the US.

[Geoff] Prior to *The Lord of the Rings*, all games were written in either 6502 or Z80 assembler. Our target, of course, was machines that were very limited in both computing power and memory, as well as with some other extremely tight constraints such as vertical retrace time - to avoid screen flicker.

The team started work, tirelessly converting the existing machine code routines used in *Sherlock* into a fully-fledged C-based adventure system, capable of running on Beam's newly installed mini-mainframe.

[LynC] When I [joined] the [adventure system] was very much in its infancy. I did the ISAM database systems and maintained the dictionary. I [started] to convert pictures produced by our artists to compressed machine code and other background work.

Mitchell was thinking big, and long-term. The complicated low-level code of *The Hobbit* and *Sherlock* had become too unwieldy, difficult to debug and almost impossible to refactor for other games – the 15 months gestation period for *Sherlock* was testament to that. He planned the new system to be as flexible as possible, and capable of authoring new adventures based upon its framework in months, not years.

[Geoff] Phil Mitchell decided to write *Lord of the Rings* in C. This presented an additional challenge - we found C compilers were far too inefficient and decided to hand compile the C into 6502 and Z80 assembler. I led that effort in terms of the tools and techniques.

To complement the technical team, Alfred Milgrom took the unprecedented step of creating the first formal non-programming role at Beam Software. Paul Kidd, who had previously worked for Melbourne House on *Mugsy's Revenge* [the 1986 sequel to *Mugsy*] was catapulted in as their first dedicated games writer. Kidd had applied for a job at Beam after his girlfriend at the time had found an obscure newspaper article advertising for a freelance writer and game designer.

[Paul] I had just come from designing and running games at our first big games conventions in Australia, so I went in and got the job. [...] Initially I was asked to produce material for some specific projects on a freelance basis. But meanwhile, the company had put out *The Hobbit* [and *Sherlock*] and found that the writing tasks were something that needed an actual writer. So, I was asked to come into the company as a full-time writer and games designer. I stepped into the first *Lord of the Rings* game after the basic game was designed, but before any location and dialogue work had been done. When I arrived, [Mitchell] was deeply involved in expanding all of that code and doing the work of making this all fit into a wee tiny memory space.

Recruiting a specialist writer was a decision ahead of its time by Fred, more akin with production processes found in the film industry, and Kidd soon found himself contributing to dialogue and descriptions and driving forward a period of quality assurance throughout 1986.

[Paul] I was the only non-programmer at that stage - artists and musicians were initially freelancing as well. [It] made for whacky times. I think they truly needed the non-programmer perspective, since often the mission fixation of a programmer is to create an excellent and efficient product, while the perspective of a games designer is: Is this game clever? Is this game fun?

The programmer-dominated hierarchy struggled to accommodate Kidd, a talented innovative force who labelled himself as the resident creative maniac. He felt that senior programmers ran the project, and they were not keen on a "mere writer" inferring with their "holy design process". Once on the team, he met with resistance, and was told that the design for the game was complete, no further input was required, and he was solely responsible for text.

[Paul] OK, so I did the text! However, there were lots of other elements that actually needed design work. Combat, puzzles, that sort of thing. So those were nutted out and blended into the structure. A huge help came from LynC, who was programming merrily away and worked with me to get these elements into the game.

The entire map of locations, the basic code and concept was in place. Mitchell and his team had also augmented the first set of puzzles that the player had to overcome. There was only the very basic skeleton of text, including the notations of location names, but no narrative. Kidd worked on creating descriptions and the character dialogue.

[Paul] [...] I sat down and fleshed those out as well. [...] There were odd moments. What do you do with a location at the top of Lady Galadriel's tree that is titled 'Rev Rest' on the map – particularly when the head of project isn't talking? So, I decided it would be a revolving restaurant. Take that, Sauron! Writing out dialogue and activity loops was initially done by writing on file cards, then manually checking that all the links, loops and logic worked. Primitive and fool proof!

One element of games development that Milgrom hadn't really invested in was testing, or Quality Assurance. Both *The Hobbit* and *Sherlock* had been plagued by an array of code bugs, and strange behaviours that emanated from the complex implementation of non-playable character rules conjured by Veronika Megler. Paul saw it as another opportunity.

[Paul] [...] There was very little 'games testing' procedure in place – only testing for technical bugs that made the game fall over. So, I spent days doing play throughs and delivered reports on strange things that could be done with the game by the twisted minds of players. Some things that were absolute errors were fixed. But other things were just left in place as 'aaah – no one's ever going to try doing that!"

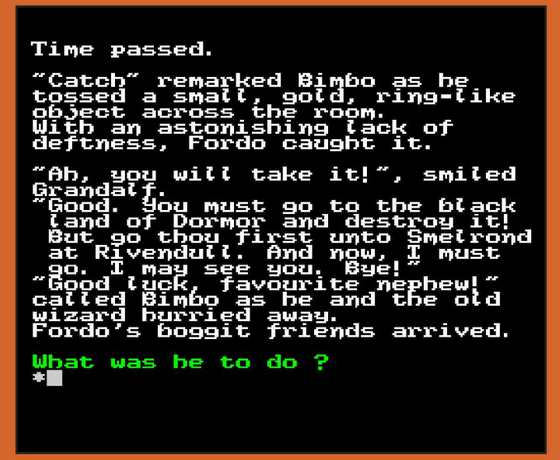
Rings' development barely received a mention in the press for nine months, with Beam working on the premise that the first game would be ready to hit the shelves before the year was out. A single interview with Mitchell was published in Computer and Videogames Magazine [C&VG] (conducted in the previous year after the release of *Sherlock*) as Milgrom was finalising the rights to the books with Allen and Unwin. The burden of expectation grew as the calendar ticked towards the headline computing event of the year; the Personal Computer World Show, held in September at London's Olympia. The PCW Show was used by all the big publishers to announce their Christmas games and the industry was out in force. Melbourne House found themselves in illustrious company alongside Atari's Jack Tramiel and Amstrad's Alan Sugar as the record 70,000 visitors explored the 10,000 square-metre showground. Unfortunately, the long-awaited preview of *Rings* was set to disappoint fans. The game failed to materialise, and a rather embarrassed Paula Byrne resorted to playing looped clips of Ralph Bakshi's film on the big screens scattered about Melbourne House's trade stand. It was obvious with the expense that House had gone to that the game was expected to debut on time. They even employed a company called Holografix (a firm founded by Mark Eyles and Caroline Hayton of Quicksilva) to provide extravagant and impressive holograms of a Ringwraith or Nazgul (one was later offered as a *Rings* themed competition prize by Zzap!64 in March) to dazzle show goers. The gaming press were understandably keen to find out what the delay was, so Mitchell, as the face of the project was wheeled out yet again to face the befuddled journalists and reveal some information on the direction development was taking.

[Paul] I'm not sure what happened there. My official role in the game had ended when the last test was delivered. I then decided to create a QA report - a pioneering notion! - and spent long days playing through. There was certainly a rush on, because the report landed on desks when everyone was too busy to really deal with much. [...] My guess is that there were code bugs that were haunting the project, and it was taking a while to nail them down. I was out of the official loop there and never really told. Oh, the glamorous life of a writer!

Despite Paul's tireless QA work, Melbourne House missed getting the game ready for the lucrative festive period, even though Byrne had told Amstrad Action "we expect it to be the biggest selling adventure

SPOOFING SAURON

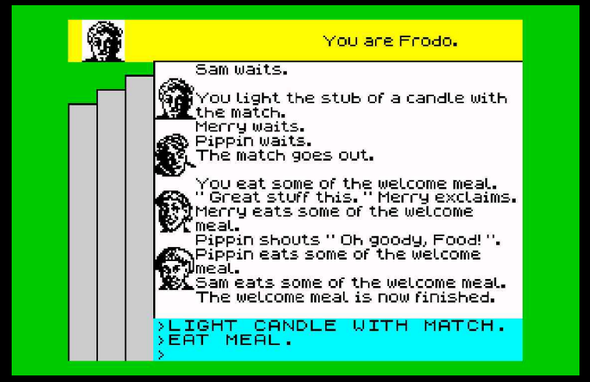
The Hobbit and *Lord of the Rings* received more than its fair share of satirical and spoof games including *The Balrogian Trilogy* from Zenobi Software and *Not The Lord of the Rings* from Psychedelic Hedgehog Software.



One of the best was *Bored of the Rings* by the master storyteller Fergus McNeil who also released *The Boggit* under the Delta 4 label. *Bored* tells the tale of Fordo and Slam, and their quest to destroy the Ring of Power in the microwave of Dormor.

Packed with some great character names, fine puzzles, loads of belching and flatulence, and a hippy version of Tom Bombadil, it's one of Fergus' best adventures.

[Above] *The Hobbit's* "comfortable tunnel like hall" becomes the "comfortable burrow" in a reassuringly familiar start to *The Lord of the Rings: Game One*.

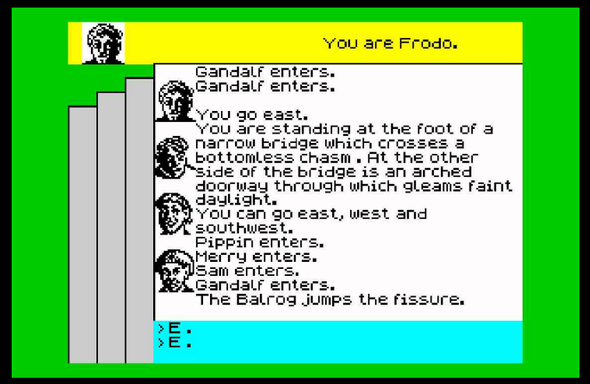


[Above] Food and fatigue plays an important role in *The Lord of the Rings*. Characters will regularly become hungry and tired and unable to proceed if they don't eat. Finding sustenance and keeping backpacks stocked becomes a continual gameplay mechanic.

[Above] Addressing the concerns about sedate pace of the Fellowship of the Rings novel, Beam introduced several side-quests that included Radagast the Wizard, Tom Bombadil and Old Man Willow, the Barrowights and Farmer Maggot.

[Above] The opening act concerns the Hobbits making the journey to Bree, where they are to meet Gandalf at the Prancing Pony Inn. It's one of many instances where reading the accompanying novel gives the player a clue to solving a puzzle.

[Above] A beautiful set-piece where the forces of Elrond and the power of Rivendell puts paid to the pursuing Black Riders. Frodo, Sam, Pippin and Merry are free to travel onwards and form the Fellowship.



[Above] The Fellowship rush through the maze-like Mines of Moria only to be confronted towards the climax of the game by The Balrog.

this Christmas". Finally, *The Lord of the Rings - Game One* (for some reason Melbourne House didn't go with *The Fellowship of the Ring* in Europe) hit the shelves in January 1986. As with *The Hobbit* and *Sherlock*, Mitchell and Beam laboured over the other ports, with the straight-forward Amstrad version arriving in February, and the Commodore 64 and BBC Micro versions taking a further month, falling into adventurer's inventories in March.

The game's luxurious packaging included "A Background to the Ring Wars" in which we are told about the second age of Middle Earth, and the forging of the rings of power by Sauron the Great, master of the evil realm of Mordor. Sauron betrayed the great Elven ringsmith Celebrimor who fought against the enslavement of the ring wearers, and a great war followed in which Sauron was overthrown and the ring cut from his finger by the human king Isuldur. Isuldur was in turn slain by orcs in an ambush, and the ring slipped from his finger as he tried to swim across a river to safety. Several millennia later, the ring was found in the river by Déagol, whose cousin and best-friend Sméagol coveted his prize and overcome with jealousy murdered him. The ring, an abusive power, slowly ate away at the soul of the poor creature, giving him an unnaturally long, but torturous life and he fled to the Misty Mountains where he hid himself in the darkness. It is here where the first Melbourne House game, *The Hobbit* took up the story as Bilbo and his thirteen dwarven companions, encouraged by the wizard Gandalf, left Hobbiton seeking to reclaim the treasure from Smaug the dragon. Encountering Sméagol on his journey, the wretched creature, now called Gollum, lost the ring to Bilbo and on the hobbit's return to Hobbiton, passed it to Frodo, his nephew and heir.

So, the scene was set for the start of *Game One*. Gandalf revealed to Frodo the nature of the ring and tasked him to destroy it by travelling to Rivendell and seeking the advice of Elrond - one of the mighty Elf-rulers of old. As with *The Hobbit*, the designers made the decision to take a broad-brush stroke to interpreting the original written material. As David Fielder had hinted at before, Melbourne House had been given artistic licence to bring Tolkien to the computing screen and Mitchell explained to C&VG magazine that their decision to embellish some of the original storylines was that "part of the problem in [The Fellowship Of The Ring book] is that not a lot happens! So, what we've done is take the basic goal - to reach Rivendell - and use the characters and basic situations [...] to create problems within the adventure."

To ease novice adventurers into the game, a unique and ground-breaking cut-down introductory program was included. Limited to a smaller subset of puzzles and locations it was touted as a "beginner's level version of the first adventure". Starting in the familiar setting of a "comfortable burrow with a round window and a green door", the instructions encouraged players to practise their adventure mapping skills by exploring every location, collecting objects and communicating with the other characters in the game. Reaching the goal was relatively straight-forward if you avoided the randomly appearing Black Riders. If you did get stuck, then a help system was included, but this posed perhaps the most difficult puzzle of the entire level. Paradoxically, typing HELP, as directed by the instruction manual, merely produced a generic "DON'T BE SILLY" response. The correct command required, as mentioned in the actual intro game itself, was HINT. The clue system was particularly useful when trying to escape the clutches of the Barrow-Wight (especially for those players not familiar with The Fellowship of the Ring book; a copy of which was included with the game). The hint supplied was, "Sing out 'Hey Dum Derry Dol' and I shall help you," and on typing HEY TOM, or DERRY, the player would be rescued by Tom Bombadil and be able to continue the quest.

So, what then of the full adventure? It's split into two parts, starting with the novel approach of being able to choose which of the main protagonists in the game to control; either Frodo, Sam, Pippin or Merry - or if you so wish, controlling all four. Melbourne House had originally toyed with the idea of six interactive characters, but scaled their ambition back during development, in the end touting the feature as the "first ever multi-player choice" adventure. Of course, this claim could be disputed, with several earlier games such as 1982's *Xanadu Adventure* for the BBC Micro, or CRL's 1984 competitive game for the C64, *The Causes of Chaos* all offering the opportunity to play as multiple characters. Nevertheless, it felt more of a gimmick given that the game could be completed by playing a single character - but the concept provided popular and we saw the same technique in other adventures including Global Software's The *Magician's Ball*, Colin Jordan's *Famous Five* [**see Issue 06**] and Mark Cantrell's *Diablo!* [**see Issue 04**]. Switching between characters was simple, with the player issuing a BECOME <character> command: For example, BECOME FRODO changes to control the hero of the story. The currently selected character was shown in icon format (though badly drawn) at the top of the neatly laid out screen display. Mitchell and his designers opted to show the adventure unfolding as the pages of a book, with the current location, complete with graphic and description (written in an elegant proportional font) on the front page, and the faces of the other hobbits shown at the side of the screen - the top page if they are present in your location, otherwise they slip back through the book.

The parsing technology, Inglish, that debuted in *The Hobbit* was embellished again and given a further makeover. Mitchell stripped back the functionality from *Sherlock* and revisited the vocabulary, before making improvements. It retained its reputation as one of the most capable and complex parsers created for an 8-bit system; perhaps getting as close to matching the standard set by Infocom as was possible in a cassette-based game. The conversation engine was overhauled, and complex sentences and multiple instructions could be entered by using prepositions, chaining commands with AND, and by including full stops.

In *Sherlock*, the amount of graphics was reduced due to the increased size of Inglish and balanced with the need for more verbose location descriptions. In *Rings*, the graphics took a clobbering, and were completely omitted from part two of the game. After the iconic images of *The Hobbit*, the *Rings* illustrations were disappointingly basic and low-res, with a few simply drawn shapes and large slabs of meaningless colour dolloped on in a vague effort to add more detail. As with its predecessors, Mitchell continued to acknowledge the trade-off between text and graphics, stating that the "limited capacity" of 8-bit based micros "doesn't allow us to do justice to both".

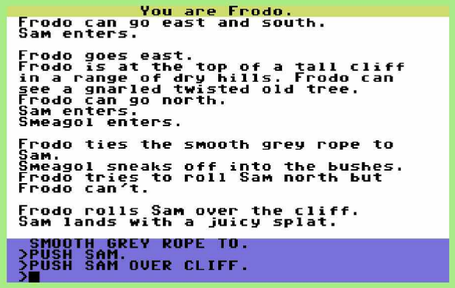
Part one of the adventure starts in Bag End, where Frodo finds a note from Gandalf the Wizard. It instructs the young Hobbit to make haste for Rivendell where he is to seek the help of Elrond and warns Frodo to take particular care in avoiding the Black Riders who are now on his scent. From there, we are whisked from Hobbiton, across the Brandywine River, on to the foothills of the Blue Mountains and across the plains of Eriador to the Withwaindle River. Once across the river, the companions pass through the Great Wooden Gate and into Bree where they encounter the mysterious Strider in the exuberant Prancing Pony Inn. With Strider's help, the adventure then passes by the fortress of Fornost, and onto the banks of the river Mitheithel - the furthermost eastern location on the game map. To get to the end, there's some basic puzzling, a lot of putting things inside backpacks, a fiendish maze and an encounter with Tom Bombadil (more in-depth than the beginner's level) and a side-quest with an old wizard dressed as a monk.

The graphics-less part two, which can be played without continuing with the saved data from the first game (though you lose inventory and the companionship of Strider for some reason), meanders through the Trollshaws and fords the Bruinen River (dispatching the Black Riders in the process) towards the Great Hall of Elrond in Rivendell. It is a tense and nervous affair, especially after the foundation of the Fellowship at Rivendell and the failure on the cliffs of Caradhras. The suspense heightens when the players delves into the claustrophobic maze formed from the Mines of Moria. It's not the Nazgûl that are the main threat in this section, but a pair of ominous glowing eyes in the shadows that follow the party wherever they go. The adventure ends beyond the woods of Lothlorien after a meeting with the elven queen Galadriel.

Unfortunately, *Rings* is not without its problems. There is a liberal interpretation of the events of the book, including several characters and locations drawn from lore rather than verbatim from the Tolkien texts. There is a lot of wandering around (in contrast to the tight geography of *The Hobbit*), and a completely pointless section

THE MAHOGANY BOOKCASE GOES WEST

Even though Beam and Philip Mitchell rewrote the *Sherlock* adventure engine, bugs and memorable emergent behaviours inherent to the original games remained. From being able to roll Sam off the cliff killing him at the start of the game, to having



him attack himself, or making the Black Riders kill each other and hopping into your own backpack and becoming invisible, the complexity of Veronika Megler's character rules often resulted in the unexpected happening.

Paul Kidd was charged with finding and fixing these bugs and recounts some of his favourites oddities:

1) The ring wraiths close in on the hobbits, and one of them says "Give us the ring!" So I did. The Wraiths attacked anyone who had the ring, and then took it off their dead body. So – if you just did as they asked and gave the ring to one wraith, the others would all turn and attack it. It would fight back, and eventually die. Another wraith would take the ring, and the others would then attack that one – etc etc. So you just stood back. Finally there would be one staggering, battered wraith left. You stabbed it, took back the ring, and walked way. The fun was that the dead wraiths would appear at other intervals in the game, because they were scripted to loom threateningly on hilltops etc. So you would see them – but they would still be lying there dead and unable to make any actions.

2) Then, in Bree, I decided to kill the wraith's horses that had all been put in a stable. The Wraiths keep appearing for the rest of the game trying to chase you – but they can't move because their horses are dead. So you wander past them, leaving them screeching 'yah, mule' and trying to flog their dead mounts.

3) The best bit of idiocy was a simple one. In Bag End at the very start of the game, you open up your backpack, get inside it and close it. The game then lets you travel happily about. Minions of the dark lord cannot see you, because nothing can see into a closed container. So - "travel Middle Earth in a Bag!" You bounded along down the roads, right past Ring Wraiths, safe as houses!

4) Oh – in the 2nd and 3rd game, monsters would do whatever you told them to do. So – Shelob backs you into a corner? Just "Say to Shelob 'go north, north, west' - and she would sod off. This worked for every monster in the game. Golden!

towards the end of the first part where for around 30 turns you just type FOLLOW STRIDER. Paul Kidd's writing put prose front-and-centre in the game, and it tells in a lot of locations with some excellent descriptive text. Unfortunately, there is plenty of poorly written, drab, and dreary and downright laughable content, including a cave with a scrawled "Bilbo Woz Ere" message. Computer Gamer magazine was one of the many outlets to pick up on the dubious humour and misjudged anachronisms. In one location there is a crowd, described as dancing to the music of an "incredibly loud heavy metal orc band" which it said was more akin to Fergus McNeil than Professor Tolkien.

[Paul] Well when I arrived, the game already included 'watery tarts' in lakes distributing swords, and other Monty Pythonisms. The gist of the thing was clearly to have a Tolkien set of bones, but to have some gamer humour running through the thing. So that was what I kept in mind. I happily contributed my own fun – often hidden as what we would nowadays call 'easter eggs'.

The game's most obvious Achilles heel was undoubtedly its parser's processing speed. A slow response time in adventures was beginning to be seen as unacceptable by players, particularly given the speedy performance of amateur efforts produced using tools like *The Quill*. *Rings'* reactions to inputs were sluggish at best bogged down with the extra processing time of applying rules to four playable protagonists and the overhead of non-playable character AI.

[Paul] That parser sure was fernicketty! [sic] The guys were trying to make that code do a lot. It was pretty much pushing that style of game to its breakpoint, tech wise.

On the game's launch, Melbourne House's PR department went into overdrive. Melbourne based artist Ian McCausland, famed for his iconic 1970s music posters for world famous rock bands, designed the striking advertisement and box art featuring a stylised Nazgûl borne upon his steed. The blurb proclaimed "AT LAST! The eagerly awaited sequel to the fabulous classic *The Hobbit* is now available" and promised that *Lord of the Rings Game One* had an "astonishing vocabulary, graphics and more locations than you could imagine possible." The Amstrad, BBC and Commodore 64 versions arrived in March of 1986, all three receiving a disk-based version that speeded up loading times and overcame the laborious need to reload a huge amount of data from cassette whenever you died, or wanted to restart. It was a return to form with the game's box, and perhaps one of the best packaged games of the 8-bit era. Two cassettes came beautifully presented in an oversized video-cassette sized clam case, complete with a copy of the first volume of Tolkien's trilogy, The Fellowship of the Ring. It was a product of the licencing deal that had been struck with the publisher and labelled as "the ultimate hint book". At £15.95, *Game One* was hugely expensive, and one of the costliest 8-bit games of all time. Nevertheless, it didn't put off consumers, and in the coming weeks and months it maintained a strong showing in the multi-format sales charts.

In the media, the reception was mixed, but certainly Philip Mitchell thought it was his best adventure to date, telling Popular Computing Weekly at the end of January 1986 that *Rings* was "the best thing I've done [and] certainly [...] the best adventure game Melbourne House has released." Popular Computing Weekly was *Rings* most voracious supporter, with the magazine's comments and journalistic quotes featured in advertisements for the game. *Game One* was "the most advanced, original and involving adventure you will ever play" they said, and "without peer in terms of scope, imagination and involvement." A gold sticker adorned later packaging with "ADVENTURE GAME OF THE YEAR", awarded by the readers of the magazine.

Gordon Hamlett of Computer Gamer agreed that it was Melbourne House's best, and said *Rings* was "a flawed classic maybe, but a classic nevertheless." Steve Cooke, the White Wizard of Zzap!64, awarded the game 85%, and said that "apart from the occasional bug, [...] I found myself becoming more and more involved in Tolkien's world." Unfortunately, well-respected adventure legend Tony Bridge pulled no punches. After his initial favourable comments when first previewing the title, he later tore the game to shreds asking why

[Above] From left to right: Paul Kidd, John Haward and Norton Truter.

"Melbourne House and Philip Mitchell seem to be unable to learn from the lessons of modern adventure programming". He criticised its lack of atmosphere and suspect coding - "[there] is no excuse for foisting on the public such a badly conceived, badly programmed piece of rubbish as *Lord of the Rings*", concluding that "Melbourne House should take a look at Fergus McNeil's *Bored of the Rings* [see Spoofing Sauron boxout] if they would like to see how a true enthusiast and brilliant programmer approaches the task.".

In the end, Hamlett was probably closest in his assessment of the game. Mitchell and team were constrained by the boundaries of cassette-based text adventures. The sluggish parser and turn processing was the game's ultimate downfall with the relatively slow CPUs of 8-bit machines struggling to cope with workload of managing multiple protagonists and advanced non-player character ruleset.

These technical issues only highlighted the sedate and dawdling plot. It's telling that Peter Jackson, the New Zealand film director, producer, and screenwriter, battled with the same pacing problem that had plagued the videogame when he was attempting to adapt the Lord of the Rings trilogy as games; Jackson said "Tolkien gave his characters a fairly leisurely journey - I don't mean the length of the journey, but rather the lack of dramatic tension, especially pre-Rivendell. For the movies, we [had] to make motivations a little tighter and more urgent."

Melbourne House's *Rings* suffered from the same lack of suspense, with any feeling of foreboding or anxiety from being pursued by The Black Riders, washed away by the overly lengthy pause in between commands. Jackson's film ultimately managed to create an atmosphere of expectation, nervousness, and nail-biting pressure. The game never delivered the same pace and feeling of danger for the player. You never felt like you were only one step ahead of the hunters as you trudged laboriously through the landscape.

As development commenced on the second game, Melbourne House's UK Managing Director, Geoff Heath moved over to the Mastertronic Group with the remit of expanding the budget house's operation into full-priced games. At the turn of the new year, Melbourne House was rumoured to be in financial difficulties despite reports that their products accounted for 10% of the UK games market in 1986. Alfred Milgrom entered into negotiations with Frank Herman, director of Mastertronic to sell the UK arm of the publisher. In February 1987 the purchase was announced, with House costing the Mastertronic Group just over £1 million.

"Naomi and I will retain our interest in Melbourne House Australia," explained Milgrom to Popular Computing Weekly, "We are simply selling the UK company with which we will continue to have a close relationship." Marketing Manager Rachel Davies and General Manager Martin Corrall were both reunited with format boss Geoff Heath under the new stewardship. Heath was keen to emphasise that the sale would be as seamless as possible, telling Crash Magazine in Issue 39 that "Melbourne House will retain its own identity. We will be raising the company profile and ensuring that the product is as exciting as possible, but it will remain a separate entity from Mastertronic. It won't be producing budget titles, and Mastertronic won't be going full price. It has a terrific reputation, and we intend to keep it that way."

For Beam Software, not included in the sale, the loss of a closely allied publisher meant that they had to change the way that they did business. They no longer had the creative freedom and control over the games they wished to make, and their production schedules would have to alter and adjust to being a work-for-hire studio.

[Paul] There was a sudden paradigmatic shift. Kaftans vanished. Rigid office structure appeared, free flow of ideas was replaced by formal meetings, "need to know" and hierarchy. Suddenly

management were all awarded titles based on the movie industry. The income gap dramatically widened. The 'men in suits era' began.

The impact of the changes would cause lasting damage to the development of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. House had originally planned to release the sequels around twelve months apart, each bundled with a copy of the relevant novel, and with the same eye-catching packaging of the first game. Before the next game was started, to the surprise of everyone at Beam and without a whisper in the press, Philip Mitchell (the superstar programmer and the face of Melbourne House and its mega-adventures since the inception of *The Hobbit*) left the company.

With their new owner Mastertronic closing monitoring development schedules and costs, this ambitious goal was unlikely to be achieved, especially with the loss of a key member of the team.

[Paul] I don't know why. He seemed to move into more of company management as the company began its first changes. He also moved on to do many of the arcade-style titles. He may have been stuck working with parser codes longer than mortal man was meant to endure.

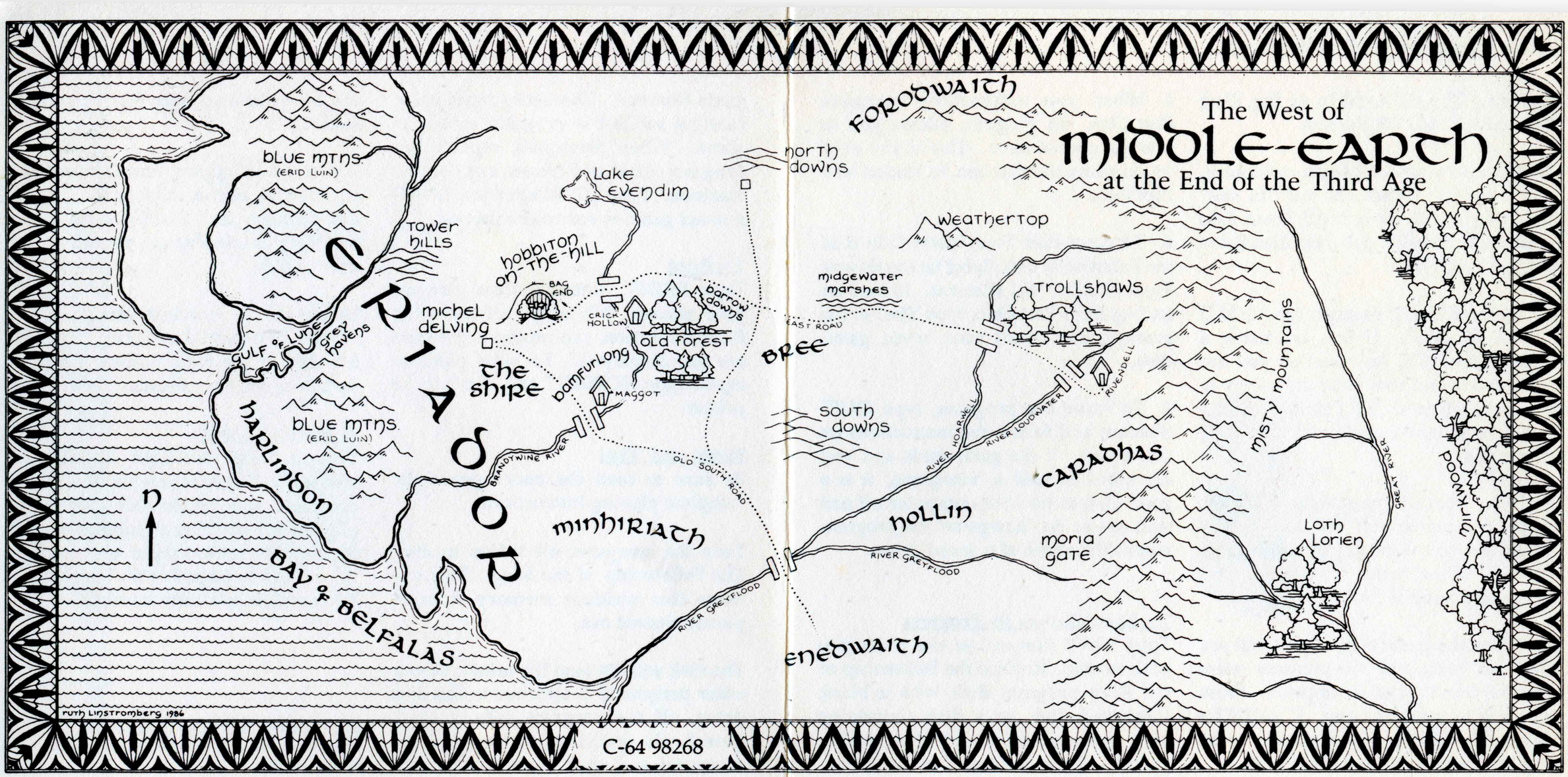
The vacuum in the development team needed to be filled, especially with the *Lord of the Rings Part Two* project seemingly stalled. Milgrom moved to recruit more talent and give the game a much-needed boost. One of the new programming intakes was Norton Truter, enlisted from Monash University, where he had just graduated with a degree in Computer Science. Norton's first experience at school was programming a PDP-11 using a series of marksense eletrographics cards fed into the machines.

[Norton] I remember copying programs from a book somewhere. The first program I remember copying was printing a city skyline. It was written in BASIC on the mark sense card reader. You'd put in the cards, and then you entered the DATA sequence at the end which was a whole series of comma separated binary codes. I thought it was cool at the time - I was 14! The first program I remember writing from scratch, by myself, from my own idea was *Russian Roulette*.

Kids would turn up with cards containing the teacher's names, and I would take my stacks of program cards and their stack of data cards and run them through the machine. There was a big sheet printer next to it, and it would print out Mr Johnson picks up the gun and puts it to his head, and it would print out dot dot dot, *click*. Then the next teacher, Mr Allan picks up the gun and puts it to his head. When the gun goes off it prints out a big KABOOM! Banner across the page. There'd be like, six kids standing around the printer, and they'd be a big cheer when a teacher blew his brains out.

Without any home computing experience outside of university, Norton was recruited because of his background in formal programming. His C skills would be put to good use alongside LynC, evolving the adventure system left by Mitchell.

[Below] Each of Addison-Wesley's US releases of *The Lord of the Rings* games came exquisitely packaged and included a line drawn map pertaining to the adventure that lie ahead.



[Opposite] The graphics engine was changed for *Shadows of Mordor* with each location having an individually displayed illustration and introduction text. These images are taken from the ZX Spectrum version of the game.

[Paul] Norton was a blast. Young and enthusiastic and boppy. An eager, delightful guy filled with joy of life. He keeps all of that to this day. I loved working with him.

The drive to recruit developers with a more formal project management background led to John Haward joining the company. John had studied meteorology at University, performing climate modelling for the planet Mars before moving on to study for his Masters. It was a path with restrictive career options, so he took a job at Melbourne University as a technical administrator before seeing an advert for a computer programmer who knew the works of Tolkien.

[John] How could I not follow that up being very familiar with The Lord of the Rings, and a voracious reader? [...] The company in the advert] was Beam Software, so I bailed on the university and went to work for Fred Milgrom.

[Paul] The [*Game Two*] project had completely stalled. Then John arrived to take over the programming reins [which] was just an utterly welcome event. John was, is and ever shall be an utter delight. He was a humorous, patient guy with a ready wit. We were all young, and just getting to that stage where people were starting to get married and even have kids. So, we were all a big part of each other's lives. We also played tabletop RPGs socially with each other.

John described the development ethos when he arrived at Beam as being attic-autere; still partially dominated by programmers who slaved over a ZX Spectrum or Commodore 64 coding assembly language to create games. The production environment adopted for *Lord of the Rings Game One* was evolving and Milgrom aimed to exert more control on the development processes for the next game.

[John] We used to joke that a lot of the coders did not have discipline, they could code, but were not organised. [...] They were brilliant technically in their sphere. And that other thing of the production team. We had three or four artists all addicted to Italian motorcycles. We had one muso, who was in the perpetual quest for the perfect flattop haircut. [...] So, to try and keep track of this, Fred had a habit of hiring a thin veneer of people who were not assembly language coders or technical gurus and they would be the Team Leaders. That's where I fell in, as a Team Leader.

One of his first jobs was to deal with the fallout from the first game. Melbourne House received an endless stream of letters from fans accusing them of playing fast and loose with the precious Tolkien canon. Then there was the task of placating the Tolkien estate – who did maintain a very keen interest in what Beam were doing.

[John] I was the one who had to cope with the flood of letters after *Lord of the Rings Part One* – asking "why are you putting so much humour in there?" Of course, the answer being, people thought it was funny. In order to keep the Tolkien Estate happy, we had to try and stay reasonably close [to the books].

[Paul] Everything had to be run past them. They weren't a problem to deal with. They signed off on everything and were happy.

Paul told Australian Commodore Review Magazine that the idea for the next game was to make something better than *The Lord of the Rings* and that broke the ever-constant comparisons with *The Hobbit*. He said "I don't think *The Hobbit* actually came into consideration. [...] The system we used for *The Hobbit* changed quite a lot [and] for its time it was heading the field, but as everything else caught up with it we couldn't use it as a benchmark."

The challenge was now to make a sequel: a parser game in the same style, utilising the existing adventure engine, but with the remit of improving the game's performance. LynC continued to work on the bare metal of the code, whereas Norton debugged the internals and focused on writing the adventure logic. They both worked closely with Paul, under the watchful gaze of John.

[Paul] From my point of view, I was coming in to help create this thing from absolute scratch. So, I got to do locations and puzzles and so on from the absolute outset without having to adapt and work with someone else's designs. Much easier – far better. Just wind me up and let me go.

[John] Paul was a joy to work with - surfing that mythical line between genius and occasional insanity – but was a wonderful guy to work with.

[Norton] [Paul] wrote the story. He produced the storyboarding, laying out what the characters would do, where they would go and drawing the map and laying out how the map looked – all the locations. He wrote most of the text for the descriptions themselves. Certainly, he was reading through the books, getting an idea of the language and how the language would look like and then giving that language to me as text that I would enter.

[Paul] Well – I grew up with the books, so I knew the text chapter and verse. So, it was a matter of trying to broadly paint the feel. There were funny fixes to the problems inherent in the code – like making armies and hordes into sort of 'gestalt creatures' that moved and acted as one. It also had to be more than just a recreation of the books – the player had to be challenged.

Norton and LynC were charged with maintaining the *Lord of the Rings* adventure engine and its many composite parts: A core set of C functions and routines that compiled into the game's engine, the screen display, user input, etc; a dataset that controlled the game logic, movement between locations for example; and an adventure programming language that was used to describe the rudimentary artificial intelligence that each character possessed and the emergent behaviours that made *The Hobbit* and *Sherlock* so appealing to players.

[Norton] Each of the characters had an action script. One of them was the primary action script, so when you are not controlling them, they would perform a sequence of actions. So, let's say Orcs would run through the forest, get to the rocky outcrop and then turn around and do something else. Essentially If you read the script it would read as if you were playing the game entering a certain set of commands. It would say, GO WEST, NORTH, WAIT, you know? They also had a reaction script where you could program them to react to the world and what was going on around them. If the Orc is standing stationary and you entered as Frodo or Sam, then they had a reaction to seeing you or you wielding Sting, or a reaction to another object or something that happens to be there.

Together with Paul, Norton meticulously crafted pages and pages of adventure script for each of the characters. Gollum's script alone spilled over dozens of sheets of commands, handwritten by Paul and then converted and entered as the adventure programming language into the mainframe system.

[Paul] Oooh magic juju! Yes – I believe there was a scripting language. I remember them burning candles and sacrificing lagomorphs to it in the dark spaces beneath the stairs. We did not ask!

The design work was pretty swift. The mature adventure system meant that less time was needed to debug its inner workings and more time could be devoted to shaping the narrative and adventure logic. Kidd worked quickly since he was no longer bound by legacy design constraints.

[Paul] Leave me alone, and I will get things done for you pretty damned fast. [...] As far as I understand, the coding avoided major pitfalls and disasters. Not my department – but I never saw keyboards being thrown at walls!

Once John evaluated the position of the *Game Two* project, he found that Mitchell had left another problem. The game was less than 50%

[Opposite] *The Shadows of Mordor* inlay artwork entitled "Shelob" is by Canadian Lord of the Rings artist and illustrator Ted Nasmith.

completed, but already 33% over size.

[John] One of the biggest problems we had which surfaced not long after I joined, was that the game as planned was going to be massively too big to fit into a cassette tape. And so, the great winnowing, the great culling had to follow. It had to be simplified, you know, we had to bring it down, we only had so many electrons we could push.

[Norton] A lot of that work had already been done about how to do the compression and how to condense things. Each location's description for example wasn't actually in text. There was a dictionary of words and each word had a byte offset. So, a location description is going to be a byte sequence of indexes into the dictionary. You'd give a description to the compiler, then you'd give it a dictionary and it then reads the dictionary and creates that byte sequences of indexes to words.

Norton implemented a series of complex optimisations, using his linguistic skills to analyse the lexical structure and construction of the English language and specifically the prose that Paul was writing. He identified words that reoccurred frequently and found that plurals were especially prevalent. He then worked out a way of compacting the dictionary the game used, squeezing down the number of bytes it took to reference those words.

[Norton] So, when you have a word that has a simple plural, we could set a flag that indicates which one of the plurals you would add. For example, duck and ducks: If the word you need to print on screen is duck - its word number 8. If it's ducks, then its word number 8 with a flag set. Plurals could be a single s or es, so we could optimise some of these things by looking at these parts of the dictionary. It helped a lot, it meant that the code that ran – it wasn't a simple sequence of bytes, a word like jigsaw is 6 letters, but if it is in the dictionary and we use it many times over, that means it only takes up 2 bytes every time you use it, and that means it's much more efficient.

At regular intervals, the dictionary would be dumped out and Norton would trawl through the words to see if he could manually adjust the use of particular words to increase their repetition and thus save even more precious memory space.

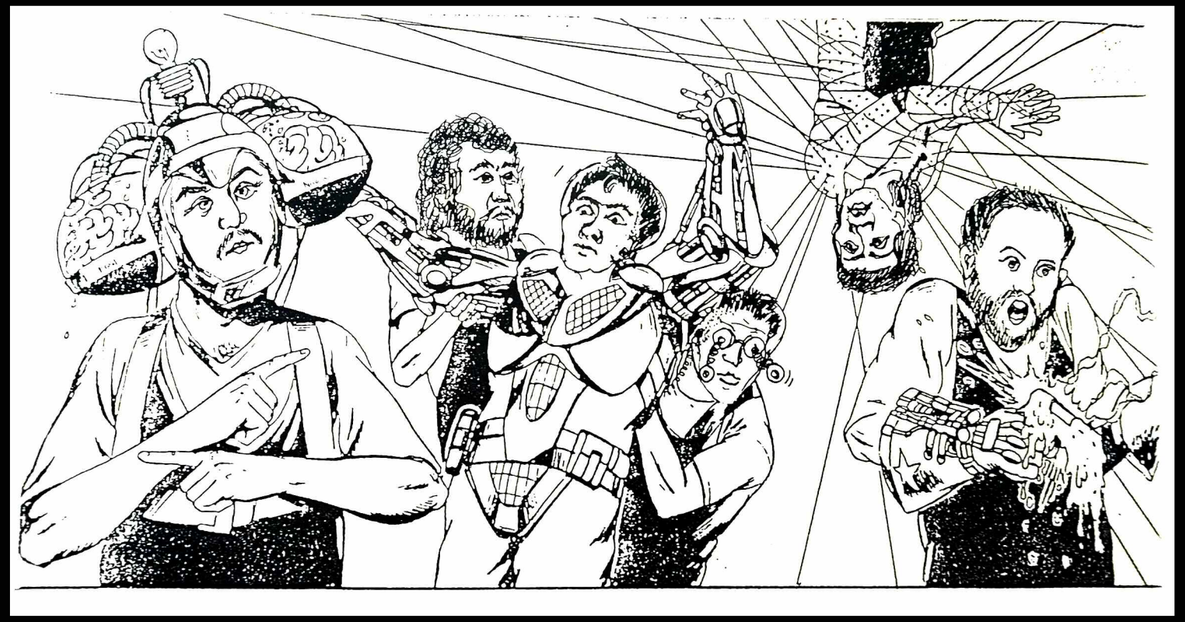
[Norton] The Spectrum was the most troublesome because it had the smallest RAM - we had to work hard to make it fit. Descriptions were truncated, and we had to pull words to make it fit. It just required going through the dictionary, working out how to optimise that, taking out words that we did not need out of the dictionary. I had to cross-corollate words that we used in the game with the words that we had in the dictionary, and there were words we had included that we never used.

There was one word that caused much procrastination when examining one vocabulary dataset. The word mindles kept cropped up as being used over and over again. After much head scratching, Norton released that it was never actually used in the database, and that he was searching for a word that existed in the text with its plural flag set – mindless. Because it was so time consuming the optimisation process would be left until the end of a period of development. Norton would compile Paul's location text exactly how it was given to him, in a raw unedited and longhand format.

[Norton] It's only when we'd get to something like a particular system that wouldn't fit that's when I'd go back to Paul and say we'd need to pull things out – words out of the dictionary, or descriptions, remove the descriptions of things or shorten the action scripts.

[Paul] Well – I had to rewrite things to make it fit! The hard tech limits were in place.

Once finished, it was cross compiled using the tools developed by Geoff Halprin to take the game engine, data and adventure programming language scripts and create the interpreter and game



[Above] Russell Comte, the graphics artist on *Lord of the Rings* created this artwork after listening to the developers play the dystopian science-fiction tabletop game Paranoia. From left to right: John Haward, Geoff Halprin, Steve Taylor, Doug Palmer, Norton Truter and Paul Kidd.

data for each target machine. Then testing had to take place. Instead of writing to media such as a disk or cassette, or even pushing the compiled code along a serial cable into a Spectrum or Commodore, the Beam development method opted for something more novel.

[John] The code was then compiled in the DEC to Z80 or 6502, or whatever they were going to do it in. It was then burnt to EPROM chips for the Sinclair or Commodore and the game ran natively. No-one was coding assembly language, that was a past thing, everyone was using this emulator model.

Originally entitled *Land of Shadow*, the second game was announced as the *Shadows of Mordor* and given the obvious subtitle of *The Lord of the Rings Game Two*.

[Paul] A bucketload [of different titles] were floated. Part of my job – I wrote out a dozen, and other people added their own. We looked at it all, circled the best, and *Shadows of Mordor* won. The unofficial title was *Where Hobbits Dare!*

Previews started to appear in the press in May of 1987, with Melbourne House running teaser advertisements tantalising the new adventure - "You've played *The Hobbit*, you've played *The Lord of the Rings,* now play *Shadows of Mordor*" they proclaimed. C&VG magazine ran an exclusive in-depth preview of the game, with some impressive looking location graphics before the game finally hit retail shelves a month or so later.

The story picks up where the first game left off, with The Fellowship having departed Lothlorien continuing their quest to destroy the Ring of Power in Mordor. The adventure begins on the banks of Lake Nen-Hithoel, where our protagonists Frodo and Sam break the Fellowship, leaving their companions behind to continue their journey. Gone was the chance to control up to four characters in *Mordor*, and players had to be content with guiding Frodo or Sam individually, or switching between both of them.

[John] It would have been lovely [to play as more characters], but with the technology at the time, if the four characters in *Lord of the Rings Part One* were causing grief then you can imagine how trying to doing the whole Aragorn, Éomer, etc, etc, would have been a nightmare.

[Paul] Yeah – there were thoughts about doing two or even three games in one box – one following the Sam/Frodo pair, [and the] others following Pippin and Merry into Rohan, Isengard Gondor and so on. But it was too ambitious, and we decided to make this basically Sam and Frodo's story. [...] Cutting back and forth between multiple characters spread out across Middle Earth would have been too chaotic.

The shortened development time took its toll on the game's presentation. Gone was the ambitious stylised paging-style screen layout of the first game. Beam opted for a more traditional single column display of location text and the command input being in-line with the screen. At the top, the icon representation of each hobbit was dropped, with the character currently under control displayed in plain text. The Spectrum display was the neatest, utilising the same handsome proportional font seen in the previous game. The Amstrad and Commodore versions made use of their respective default system character sets, and though the screen displays weren't particularly unattractive, they were uninteresting, and by using a selection of drab colours made the whole look and feel rather plain, jaded and dated.

Inglish returned in its third incarnation, with the same 800-word vocabulary boast in the accompanying media. Although the language parser and infrastructure for *Shadows of Mordor* was a considerable improvement, its refinements and stability were not able to improve enough on the dreadful parsing performance of *Game One*. Responses occasionally would take upwards of 10 seconds to return, and the sluggish display of the command prompt was prevalent after a location description had been displayed. Why this was allowed to continually hamper the enjoyment of the games remains a mystery.

Taking everything into account, and from all the criticism of the first game, the parser was still the key area that spoiled the gaming experience. But *Mordor*, with Paul Kidd's maturing writing style, felt more of an expressive narrative, and less of a laborious slow-paced

trudge than *Game One*. Without Mitchell it would have been easy for Beam to lose enthusiasm for the second game, and given their change in status to a "work-for-hire" studio, over one pursuing their own creative agenda, they could have been excused if they had delivered an adventure-by-numbers. Despite Paul's best QA efforts, bugs still appeared throughout the game and the emergent behaviours continued to amuse players and developers alike.

[Paul] I did a mighty report about technical bugs. But the ones that got me going were just doing the things that gamers do to a game. You know – STAB ELROND; attempt to use Sam Gamgee as a leather carrying case; CLIMB INTO PLANT POT - these all triggered off wonderfully crazy things. No one was interested in fixing them at the time, so they were just left in.

[John] There is an example in a magazine where Sam had struggled through and met Shelob the giant spider. Someone had the thought SAY TO SHELOB "GO EAST" so Shelob goes east. That's the thing about testing. It is time consuming and you must have a mind that thinks of unusual things, [and] thinks of things to shout at the giant spider and see if it evades. A lot of it was in testing and trimming the grandiose ideas down.

One bug that became a favourite of the Beam team was first identified in *Game One* and carried purposely into *Shadows of Mordor*. It involved a piece of inanimate furniture that seemed to come to life.

[Paul] There was also the ever-funny mahogany bookcase. This item for some reason would appear at random in the damnedest of places – and even travel about.

[Norton] There was a buffer overrun somewhere and it read past the end of the string into the next one, which was a pointer to something that turns out to say "The Mahogany Bookcase goes West".

[Paul] It had been a classic bug in the first game – so the Mahogany Bookcase was deliberately placed in the second game as a gag. That damned thing would turn up in the weirdest places!

Deliberately including such a bug or behaviour from the first instalment into the second game hinted at an element of

> **"*Crack of Doom*, I was never excited about that name. When the boss says this is the name of it, then that's the name of it. *Crack of Doom* just doesn't flow off the tongue. "**

mischievousness that bubbled among the various members of the development team. On closer inspection of the retail instructions, further evidence of this rascality could be found. Despite *Shadows of Mordor* being credited to Philip Mitchell the inlay also gave recognition to "The Faceless Programmers Cooperative" and the intro blurb stated that "*Mordor* is a brilliant piece of fantasy software thanks to the re-working of many of the game's systems by a highly trained team of idiots."

[John] That was me. Game by Phillip Mitchell, Inspired by Philip Mitchell with assistance from JRR Tolkien. Give him credit, [and] in some cases that did benefit Fred and Beam Software. [...] Look, I can't speak for how that happened, but we were using parsers and things that dated from the Mitchell era. I felt strongly, and Norton and Paul agreed that they were happy not to have that level of personal branding. I haven't forgotten about the Faceless Programmers Cooperative; it was a reaction to something we felt was overbranded.

[Paul] Oooh yeah. Beam was horrible at giving credit.

[Norton] You could say that [...] the game system was fundamentally built by Phil and it turns out Veronika, right? [Later on] I did not spend a lot of my time rebuilding that game engine. All the code I needed [...] was already there. I just built the character scripts, by that time the game engine was working really well. For [*Mordor*] there was still a decent amount of game system development, optimisation and debugging [to be done]. I only vaguely remember, there were a bunch of faceless programmers doing all the work. Somehow, we managed to get it onto the fly sheet for the games. But that was us.

Thankfully, LynC was credited on all of the games alongside Michael O'Rouke. For her part, she never received the press acclaim that her role should have attracted.

[LynC] My speciality was doing the Faceless deep support. They say of database administrators that no-one knows what they do unless they aren't doing it properly. [...] My children are inordinately proud of their mother when they see my name listed.

Thankfully *Mordor's* graphics were a huge improvement, each nicely drawn with lots of colour and taking up a substantial amount of the screen with a short description of the location in larger text. Bizarrely, as the location description was being written to the screen, the display was blanked, and the location graphic then drawn. It was an odd effect, but forgivable given the quality of the displays and the fact that the graphics were instantly displayed - no plot and fill this time. For once the ZX Spectrum got the best of the experience for illustrations, with the 128K version of the game having an image for around half of the games 80 or so locations. Commodore and Amstrad users had fewer illustrations, with the game being entirely text-only for poor 48K Spectrum owners (no BBC port this time).

[Norton] Watching the graphics artists at work was interesting as well, because they were limited in their colour palette and the character palette – what they could do with graphics on a particular platform. The graphics were specifically built for each of the platforms. [...] The Spectrum didn't have a high-resolution graphics mode that we were using, so it was almost like ASCII art or block art. If you look at the some of the extended ASCII character set it was block art or line art - If you set colours in a particular way you could make art out of it. So, the artists were trying to produce the entry scenes, each of the splash screens into the locations using block graphics and they were able to do better graphics on the 64 and slightly better graphics on the PC.

Descriptions were shortened (due the reduction in available RAM since the adventure was a single loaded part, rather than two in *Rings*) but the story was tighter and followed the events of The Two Towers more closely than *Game One*. Food was a lesser evil, with the hobbits carrying a good supply of Elven bread that could be used at points of hunger - though to satisfy their slippery accomplice Gollum, they'd have to seek an alternate source of sustenance.

Gollum, or Sméagol, became the central non-playable character - *Mordor's* version of *The Hobbit's* Thorin - as he was constantly in and out of the player's location "sneaking off into the bushes" when you needed him. Getting the villainous creature to help demonstrated the strength of Inglish, and *Mordor's* superior character-interaction was able to handle a multitude of different conversations and commands between characters. Working with other characters was fundamental to progressing deeper into the adventure: With their Elven cloaks, and armed with his Mithrill chain-mail shirt and The Phial of Galadriel, Frodo keeps company with Sam through the tangle of the Dead Marshes and across the Desolate Plains onto a meeting with Faramir, Captain of Gondor. From the crossroads at the opening of Imlad Morgul, they walk into the Valley of the Nazgûl, climb the crooked stairs of Cirith Ungol, and

venture into Shelob's Lair where the curtain closes on *Game Two*.

The sale of Melbourne House to Mastertronic put paid to *Mordor* receiving the same extravagant packaging and publicity campaign of the first game. The original deal with Allen and Unwin had been for each game to include a copy of the novel, but the new austere owners shipped *Mordor* in a bog-standard double-cassette jewel case. John felt that their approach was purely driven by the finances and influenced by the make-up of the British game market. He expressed his frustrations to Australian Commodore Review magazine saying that "in Britain there is certainly the pressure to push everything out into the marketplace. I mean, you get about 18 new titles in a week. [...] Of course, it's not worth spending the time and attention on a game because you won't get your money back." Other adventures that shipped under the new Melbourne House label such as *The Mystery of Arkham Manor* released in the same year [**see Issue 06**] received the same underwhelming treatment. The packaging's one redeeming feature was its cover - a striking piece of artwork entitled "Shelob" from acclaimed Tolkien artist Ted Nasmith.

[Norton] There was a conflict between what Mastertronic wanted and what Fred wanted after selling Melbourne House. I didn't really pay that very much attention and can't comment on what impact the marketing of *Shadows of Mordor* had.

[John] At that point I was too naïve to be disappointed. There was just the thrill to find out that it was out there.

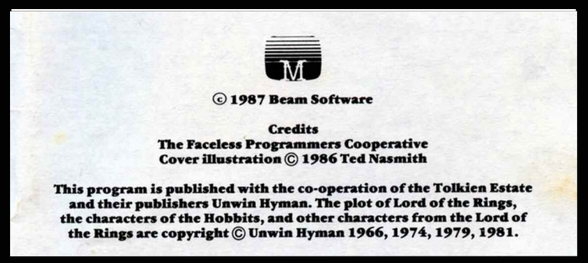
[Paul] [To me] it definitely felt like we had been dropped from a premiere project to an also-ran.

For the first time in several years Melbourne House did not preview an adventure game at the 1987 PCW Show. Adventure publishing was moving into the indie sphere, with the 8-bit mainstream market arguably past the peak and in decline. On the 16-bit machines, Magnetic Scrolls had wowed the public with *The Pawn*, and was set to release *The Guild of Thieves* alongside Level 9's *Scapeghost* and the excellent *Gnome Ranger*. With stiff competition from the next

"It definitely felt like we had been dropped from a premiere project to an also-ran. "

generation of games *Mordor* received a less than lukewarm reception in the gaming press. On the Commodore 64 particularly it received heavy criticism, with ZZap!64 commenting that the only good thing about the game was that it didn't crash, and it wasn't "destined to share the fame of its predecessors". ZZap!64 awarded the game a paltry 55%. Premier adventure guru Keith Campbell, writing for Commodore User made the comparison between the new 16-bit parsers and *Mordor's* Inglish, pointing out that it was "looking very long in the tooth." Turning his attention to the game, he awarded it a lowly 4/10 stating that "the plot is rather unexciting, the puzzles lack interest and the whole [game] is devoid of humour." The ZX Spectrum and Amstrad versions fared marginally better. Mike Gerrard in Your

[Below] The Faceless Programmers Cooperative is credited for the development of *The Shadows of Mordor*.



[Opposite] An unusued original proof (possibly for the UK market) for the cover atwork for *The Crack of Doom*

Sinclair, thought *Mordor* was "very much better than *Lord of the Rings*" and "reminded [him] of the pleasure of playing *The Hobbit* for the first time, but with added complexity." The Pilgrim of Amstrad Action, though mainly critical of the game in his review awarded it 81%.

In Europe and Britain, the curtain fell on Melbourne House's *Lord of the Rings* games with *Shadows of Mordor*. The series received one last hurrah when *Game One* and *Mordor* were bundled together with the original *The Hobbit* as *The Tolkien Trilogy* by the undisputed kings of compilations, Beau Jolly in late 1987. The "ultimate adventure" compilation was well received with C&VG commented that the "*Tolkien Trilogy* is a brilliant package for adventure fans and is highly recommended."

Across the pond, the true trilogy was set to be completed, and it was in the States where the best experience of Beam Software's output could be found. The US computer literature publisher Addison-Wesley retained their ties with Alfred Milgrom and built a relationship with Software Licencing and Marketing or SLM - one of Beam's group of companies that held its intellectual and technology property rights.

After publishing *The Hobbit*, Addison-Wesley extended their "Software Adventure" series to include *Game One* and *Shadows of Mordor* – but for the first instalment they followed the title of Tolkien's books, renaming *Game One* to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and releasing it in 1987 on IBM PC, Commodore 64/128, Apple II and Macintosh computers. With the additional year in time between the European release and the US release hitting the shelves, they reworked the adventures making use of the disk-based machines common in American homes, and the availability of the better engine developed by Norton and LynC for *Shadows of Mordor*. Gone was the complex paged screen layout and instead the simplified display and neat location illustration mechanism was employed. Next came *Shadows of Mordor*, keeping the naming convention in line with their continental cousins. The Tolkien Software Adventure Series was completed with a final game called *The Crack of Doom* released in 1989. Originally titled *The Return of the Ring*, the final game in the series was based upon book six of The Return of the King with the player taking the sole role of Sam Gamgee. When the game starts, Gamgee finds himself at the foot of the stairs leading to the tower of Cirith Ungol where he must overcome a group of rather unpleasant orcs and free Frodo. Together they travel through the barren wastelands of Mordor and into the fiery stomach of Mount Doom destroying the ring once and for all.

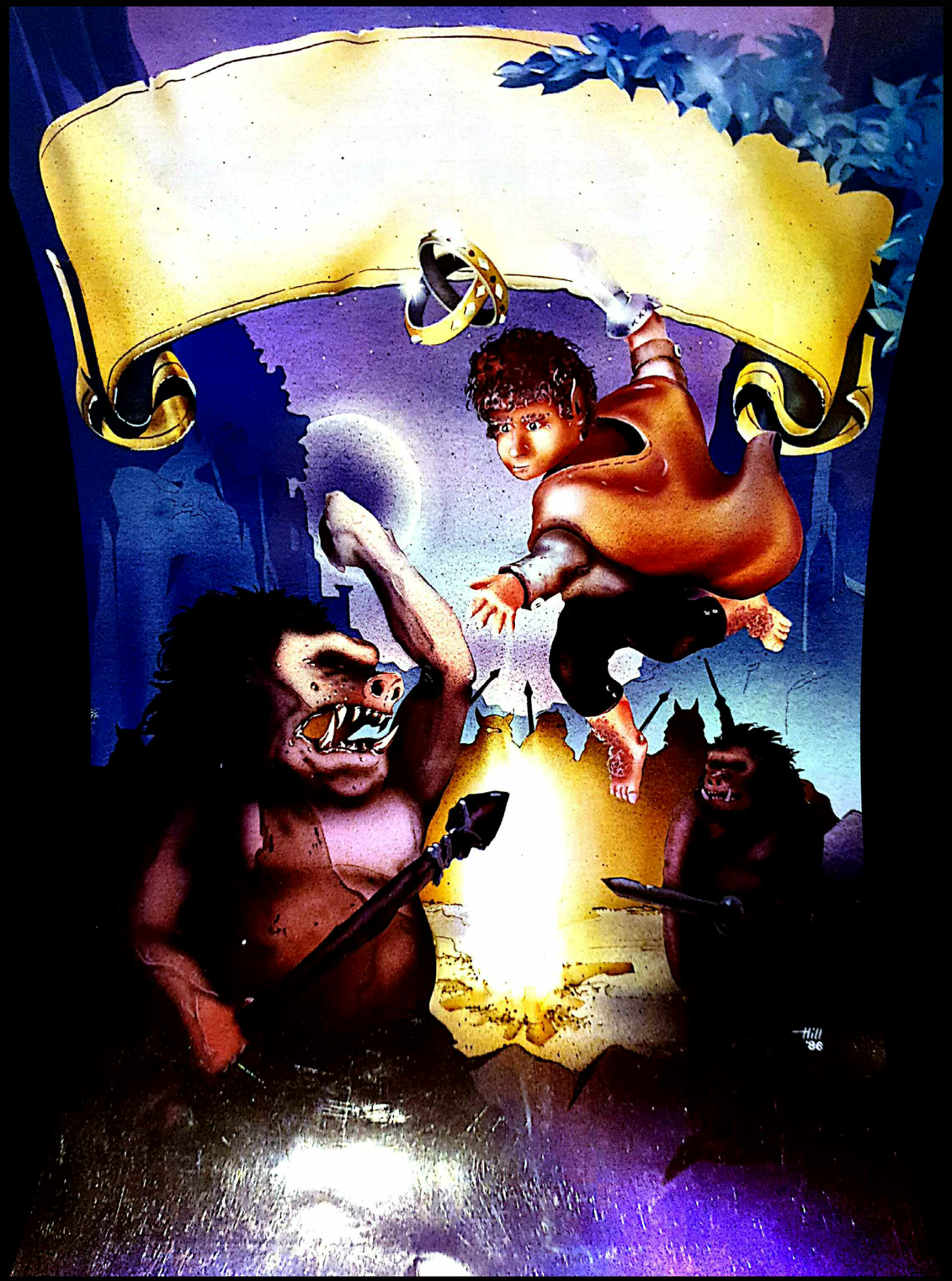
As with *Shadows of Mordor*, another unloved game name, more unofficial titles were suggested by the development team. Norton told Australian Commodore Review that "*Where Hobbits Dare* came up and it caught people's imagination, and everyone loved it. A possible title for [*Crack of Doom*] was *The Nazgûl Has Landed!*"

[John] *Crack of Doom*, I was never excited about that name. When the boss says this is the name of it, then that is the name of it. [...] *Crack of Doom* just doesn't flow off the tongue.

The production time dwindled from *Mordor's* twelve months down to a remarkable three months. The shortened development time was testament to the vision of Philip Mitchell to develop a reusable and flexible adventure writing system, and the devotion and passion put into the engine and writing by the Faceless Programming Cooperative. At the end of *Shadows of Mordor*, around December 1986, LynC had left Beam looking for a new challenge. It left John, Norton and an uncredited Paul Kidd to complete the work.

[LynC] I went from Beam to a company producing a 4GL system from scratch. [...] They needed a database and systems guru – and that was really my speciality.

[Norton] I was essentially the only programmer on *Crack of Doom*,



[Above] American publisher Wesley-Addison released *The Crack of Doom* on a variety of US-centric machines. Here is the attractive title screen and opening location illustration from the IBM DOS EGA version.

but by then the entire game engine was complete. All I was really doing was a little bit of debugging, but I augmented the engine to implement a combat-y type of system, where you were never guaranteed the outcome of a battle. I built something that was kind-of like a D&D engine - depending on whatever type of weapon you were carrying you do more damage, and you have a certain set of skills and depending on who you come up against you may or may not win.

Addison-Wesley gave the trilogy one final triumph, maintaining the superb quality of packaging that accompanied each of their previous releases. The lavish and glossy box was adorned with sumptuous Tolkien artwork and an exquisite line drawn map of Mordor. John explained to Australian Commodore Review magazine why the US publisher had gone to such lengths to make the *Rings* games a series of desirable objects. He said, "the amount of care and attention the American market requires when releasing games is about 50 times more than the English market does [...] mailing because they produce fewer units and titles than the British do."

With the text adventure market in decline, and players moving onto 16-bit machines it was the end of an era, and without an Amiga or Atari ST or European release sales were poor. *Crack of Doom* remains the rarest title for collectors wishing to obtain of all *The Lord of the Rings* games.

[Norton] I got to the end of *Crack of Doom*, it was complete and there was no further programming after that – and I do not why it never got out [into Europe]. I suspect there was a conflict with the new owners of Melbourne House and the original owners of Melbourne House, but I have no information on that whatsoever.

Norton and John felt that the time had come to move on. The takeover of Melbourne House had changed the makeup of the company, and with many videogame businesses transitioning from a cottage industry into the serious corporate world the developers found themselves at the bottom of the pile in a hostile environment. The freedoms of creativity had withered, and Beam began to focus on the production line of conversion and console work. The changes could be felt in personnel too, especially at the top.

[Paul] Fred was initially a kaftan-wearing chap who seemed to really enjoy running his business. When the company metamorphosed in later times, he transmogrified into a distant figure. [...] The diehard free spirits from older days were definitely backed into "Fort Apache" and not appreciated by the new company culture. The company now made conversions, not original games. We fought tooth and nail to hold onto the fun. But soon it was 'leave the place or go mad'.

With the team disintegrating and the text adventure market waning, Beam's ambitions for the adventure system that Alfred had invested so much capital and passion into was gone, and further adventure development was shelved. Despite *The Hobbit* incredibly still selling, and *The Lord of the Rings* games also showing steady income, the enthusiasm from the developers began to ebb away. John recalled his dwindling energies to Australian Commodore Review, saying "it's reaching that level where we've got to face the fact that other people are moving on. [...] Adventure games [...] don't sell as well as arcade games do."

[Norton] They were hoping to do more games to come out of that game system, because it was an adventure system – however by the time they got to that point the Amiga had come out and the PC had come out with some really good games on them, so text based adventure was just not the thing anymore. The market just walked away. [...] All that effort and promise evaporated very quickly. It was all joystick controlled, flight simulator, first-person shooter and some of the game systems that came out were quite reasonable. [...] The interface changed and so everything changed.

So, what should we make of *The Lord of the Rings* games? What could have been the greatest-ever set of adventures, especially from Melbourne House is so often overshadowed by its prequel, *The Hobbit*. *The Hobbit* dominates every greatest game of all-time list, as well as unquestionably being the game that influenced a generation of adventure writers. *Rings* was just too ambitious and became a victim of its own zealousness as programmers and designers over-reached far beyond the capabilities of 8-bit machines. In doing so they tied a weight of expectation around the game's neck that was too great a burden to bear. *The Hobbit* also scored so many adventure firsts; an epic story, huge vocabulary, a decent (if flawed) parser implementation of Inglish, conversations, intelligent non-playable characters, and graphics! The games that came after had nothing else to offer, despite some excellent writing they were all let down by the physical limitations of the technology. For Norton, Paul and John, the dice had already been cast picking up the pieces of a project that had taken months too long to develop and an adventure system that would ultimately tie their creative hands in a straitjacket. After *Game One*, if the engine had been modified to target the Amiga or ST we might have seen the full creative potential of this unique group of people.

Like *The Hobbit,* the history of *The Lord of the Rings* games must be written paying gratitude to the many unsung heroes of the trilogy's development. Programmer LynC, like Veronika Megler before her, was a female pioneer at the heart of the games industry, working alongside the hugely influential, but over-exposed Philip Mitchell.

[LynC] I wasn't aware I was [a female pioneer]. There have never been many other women around in all my jobs, so I never thought it was particularly unusual in the games industry. At Beam Software, no-one at any time ever alluded to my gender as a "thing". I was just one of the programmers, like the others, valued for my intellectual input, not my gender.

[Above] The opening scenes from the IBM PC version of *The Crack of Doom*. Unlike its predessors you only had the option to play as a single character, Samwise Gamgee. Here Sam climbs the staircase of Cirith Ungol to rescue Frodo.

[Paul] LynC was and is this gorgeous, kind, funny, loving soul. Ever patient. She was a great problem solver. Clearly a talented programmer [and] [...] was an absolute pillar of *Lord of the Rings Game One*. She was also deeply involved with science fiction fandom and introduced me to some great people and ideas. When the Great Bell is rung, she WILL be there!

[LynC] The feeling is mutual. I am still very fond of Paul, and for a little while I kept in touch with Danny Davis, and Geoff Halprin, but I lost contact with the others. One does after thirty some years. I never again worked for a company where everyone was so friendly and easy to get along with.

LynC and Mitchell, together with Paul, Norton, John, Geoff and the rest of the Faceless Programming Cooperative leave a legacy of adventure games that will forever be remembered. They pushed the envelope and defied he constraints of cassette-based 8-bit systems. *The Lord of the Rings* games were the last epic, legendary text adventures, from a truly visionary publisher.

Adventure author Thomas A Christie in his book, Spectrum of Adventure summed up the *Rings* series perfectly. "Though critics disagreed bitterly over the strengths and weaknesses of each Middle-earth text adventure" he said, "the [games] remained steadfastly popular amongst gamers [...] [and] the pioneering work of Philip Mitchell and Beam Software continued to resonate in discussions of the most noteworthy [...] games even in the present day." Mitchell himself reflected on the quality of the games in a retrospective interview with Fredrik Ekman in 1995: "We never quite managed to continue the success we had with *The Hobbit* through the *Lord of the Rings* series" he said, "In hindsight, I think that Lord of the Rings was not as well suited to the style of game we were doing then as *The Hobbit* was—at least we had a great deal more trouble coming up with an adventure game based on the stories. Don't get me wrong, I'm not criticizing the books — I love them all, but the adventure game just seemed to flow out of The Hobbit."

Since her days in Mordor, LynC has spent her entire professional career in computers – specifically Database Management Systems – winning awards for an industry newsletter she started and edited for the Victorian Oracle Users Group. She now enjoys semi-retirement spending her time travelling, writing and looking after her family.

After leaving Beam, Paul Kidd published more role-playing games, and expanded on his writing, releasing several novels. He has written for a host of mediums, including film, television, and comic books and was reunited with Beam alumni Gregg Barnett as a freelance designer on the iconic 1995 point-and-click *Discworld* adventures developed by Perfect 10 Productions for Psygnosis.

[Paul] The descent of Beam into the maelstrom has remained a lesson I have carried with me ever after. [...] These days I write novels, write for the screen, and remain a designer of tabletop games. I have to say that the experience at Beam, followed by other dodgy business practices I experienced in the computer games industry thereafter have kept me firmly away from industry involvement.

Norton Truter moved on to work at a company where he finally got to program the new Commodore Amiga computer. After a life in technology, he is now a Technical Lead at one of Australia's biggest energy companies.

John Haward left Beam as *The Crack of Doom* was being released. The pivot from creative, original content to the more profitable, but less risky and controllable conversion work didn't suit him. Besides, he also needed to earn more money as he had just welcomed a daughter into the world.

[John] I figured as much as I am enjoying being here, I'm afraid I'm going to give up on having fun and try to earn some money. Computer games was carefully disguised as "consumer electronics" and you couldn't go into Beam in a suit and tie, because it would be obvious, so you had to strategically park in a back alley somewhere and change out of your grungy clothes into a suit and tie, go for an interview, reverse the process and drive back to work. [...] I was lucky. The job I got after Beam was accounting software for hospitals, but when I went for the interview in one of the programmer's cubicles I saw a giant blueprint of Thunderbird 3, so I thought at least there's at least one person here I can talk to.

John Is now Risk and Compliance Manager for a leading international healthcare specialist.

Despite their journey to the Grey Havens, The Faceless Programmers Cooperative remain close and good friends.

My thanks to the generosity of every contributor, who gave their time to humour me and answer questions they've been asked a thousand times before.

Special thanks to many friends, retro acquaintances, and text adventure geeks, including the usual kindness and help from:

Fergus McNeill
Tim Gilberts
Gerrard Sweeney
Gareth Pitchford

A non-exhaustive list of references and other useful information:

Books, Magazines and Fanzines

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Spectrum of Adventure, Thomas A. Christie, Extremis Publishing
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Spectrum Computing
Lemon64
Internet Archive
The Classic Adventures Solution Archive
Stardot Forums
Games That Weren't

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There and Back Again: A Case History of Writing The Hobbit, Veronika Megler

Artwork

Lord of the Rings - Game One
Ian McCausland, Melbourne House

Shelob
Courtesy of Ted Nasmith (https://www.tednasmith.com/)

Valkyrie 17
The RamJam Corporation

Colditz, Knight's Quest and Adventure Tape 1
Phipps Associates

More Adventures for your ZX Spectrum
Virgin Books (UK)

The Amstrad Pentacle Adventure Creator
Interface Publications

The Curse of Rabenstein
Courtesy of poly.play

The Classic Adventurer
Written and designed by Mark James Hardisty

About the author

Mark James Hardisty is from Sheffield. His weekly pilgrimage to Just Micro as a child left him with an indelible love for Gremlin Graphics.

You can find Mark at @hardistymark, where he tweets about games, getting kids coding, The Cannonball Run, and his favourite game - *Elite* on the Acorn Electron.

This work is dedicated to:

My wonderful family – my mum Val, my beautiful wife Helen, and daughters Amelia Rose and Kitty Mae.

Fergus McNeill, a genius, and one of the kindest and humblest people I have had the pleasure of meeting. Thank you for *The Big Sleaze*.


MARK JAMES HARDISTY
SPE